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Derrida and Metaphor:  
Drawing out the relation between metaphor and  
proper meaning through *différance*

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Faculté des études supérieures

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Derrida and Metaphor:  
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proper meaning through metaphor

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**Abstract:**

The paper explores Derrida's essays "*La mythologie blanche*" and "*Le retrait de la métaphore*", and offers an interpretation of Derrida's complex analysis of metaphor. Metaphor is found to be an elusive entity, whose borders expand. The concepts that organize philosophy are metaphorically charged themselves, and this intertwining of philosophy and metaphor leads to complex interplay between proper meaning, or concept, and metaphoricity. The dynamics of this problematic lead through the texts of various other writers, particularly Aristotle, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. The analysis of metaphor and its disruptions is found to meet up with *différance* and Derrida's non-traditional perspective on meaning.

**Derrida - metaphor - proper meaning - post-structuralism - deconstruction**  
**- rhetoric**

**Résumé:**

Cet article explore les essais "La mythologie blanche" et "Le retrait de la métaphore", offrant une interprétation de l'analyse complexe de Derrida sur la métaphore. La métaphore s'avère être une entité évasive, dont les frontières s'agrandissent. Les concepts qui organisent la philosophie sont marqués par la métaphoricité, mais dûs à l'entrelacement de la philosophie et de la métaphore, ceci mène à l'effet complexe entre le sens propre, ou le concept, et le métaphoricité. La dynamique de cette problématique est dirigée envers les textes de certains autres auteurs: Aristote, Heidegger, et Nietzsche, en particulier. L'analyse de la métaphore et de ses ruptures se trouve à relier à la *différance* et à la perspective non-traditionnelle de Derrida sur la question de la signification.

**Derrida - métaphore - sens propre - post-structuralisme - déconstruction**  
**- rhétorique**

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## 1) Introduction

Metaphor has an important place in the work of Jacques Derrida, in more than one respect. His texts are rich with metaphorical play, and his work displays an extraordinary insightfulness into the complexity of questions of metaphor and sensitivity to the difficulties of dealing with metaphor theoretically. An investigation into how Derrida addresses the concept of metaphor should prove to be rewarding in what it reveals about the subject of metaphor itself, and it may also prove to be valuable with respect to the broader stream of Derrida's work and the questions of meaning on which so much of his writing is focused.

In dealing with these two aspects of Derrida's relationship with metaphor – his study of the concept of metaphor and the place of this question in the broader scope of his philosophy – I hope to shed new light on the nature of Derrida's thought. It has been already been noted by various writers, and explored at length by some, that questions of metaphor are of great importance in Derrida's work. This might prompt the question as to whether it is worthwhile to retrace some of the movements in Derrida's work with a focus on questions of metaphor. In this paper I will certainly have recourse to some of the writers who have already engaged with this topic; but it is also my hope that this exploration of some of Derrida's texts with a focus on metaphor will offer a new perspective with interesting differences. As many readers of Derrida have noted, and as Derrida himself has acknowledged, his texts are challenging and dense,

his writing and textual maneuvers are often complex and multilayered, and a basic or general comprehension of his texts is not always easily achieved.

The stylistic modes of Derrida's writing are tightly bound up with the philosophical positions that are found in his texts. To a great extent, and increasingly in his later texts, the style of his writing plays a central role in working out and setting into motion his theory of meaning – that is, if the analysis of language and meaning in Derrida's texts can be identified as a theory, with all that the term might entail; for it is a description that Derrida would likely, to some extent, resist. Indeed, the question of whether or not and in what sense Derrida's work could be construed as developing a theory of meaning is one that will loosely guide my investigation of questions of metaphor.

That the style of writing bears an essential relation with the philosophical content is arguably the case with any writer. In the case of Derrida's writing, however, there is a particularly striking attention to the diverging possibilities of meaning, such that his texts present certain interpretative challenges for the reader. These challenges are encountered in the metaphorical play, the diffraction into multiple meanings at once (or, to put it in Derrida's terms, the "dissemination" of meaning), the strategic use of syntactical and semantic ambivalences and of lexical resemblances, and also in playful neologisms (which Derrida calls "neographisms"), such as "*différance*", that are found in his texts. And in combination with these stylistic concerns, the philosophical movement of much of Derrida's work on language and meaning has to do with affirming this non-singularity of meaning. The diverging possibilities of

meaning are shown in his texts to be not merely *accidental* to language, not only arising in what are perceived to be marginal cases such as metaphor, but rather as a condition that is fundamental to language. To show this, Derrida develops a position that draws from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud, and their respective attempts to undo or disrupt metaphysical traditions. And particularly important in terms of the analysis of language and meaning is the fact that Derrida finds an important resource in the structuralist discoveries of Saussure. Derrida calls for a shift of emphasis in the analysis of questions of meaning, which would include transitions *from the semantic to the syntactic; from the essential unity of meaning to its irreducible division; from the nominal to the “grammatological”,* and others as well. But it is also true that Derrida works at undoing these dichotomies as such, showing that both sides of each dichotomy is intertwined, and that the traditional account of their division is inadequate. Derrida’s account of meaning is in some respects quite radical, and I will pursue its explanation here insofar as his view of meaning bears upon the question of metaphor, and vice versa.

It is demonstrated, through both the stylistic approach of Derrida’s writings and the positions he elaborates, that meaning cannot be completely carried, transferred, represented, from one text to another, or even, in fact, from one moment to another; for meaning does not have a whole and singular existence, complete and present, to be mastered. As this paper will show in greater detail, this view of meaning accords with a pivotal principle in Derrida’s work: this is the law of *différance*, a term coined by Derrida which has taken on



a prominent role throughout his texts. *Différance* signifies a principle of differentiation that is irreducible, which is effective “prior” to any possible unity of meaning. Thus, to mark in another way the direction I will be taking here, I will inquire into how metaphor can be identified, construed, and thought vis-à-vis the axis of *différance*.

In the essay “*La mythologie blanche: la métaphore dans le texte philosophique*”, a sustained exploration of questions of metaphor, Derrida examines the question of the role of metaphor in philosophy, and its analysis in philosophy and rhetoric. “*La mythologie blanche*” considers a variety of texts that deal with the concept of metaphor; these texts, from diverse writers, contain important common threads which Derrida attempts to draw out and connect. “*La mythologie blanche*”, at least at the outset, is oriented by the following question: *How can philosophy master metaphor, or even provide a plausible account of metaphor, when metaphor appears to be operative in so much of its text and in so many of its concepts?*

It is not far into “*La mythologie blanche*” that Derrida provides a provisional answer:

Au lieu de risquer ici des prolegomènes à quelque métaphorique future, essayons plutôt de reconnaître en son principe la *condition d'impossibilité* d'un tel projet. Sous sa forme la plus pauvre, la plus abstraite, la limite serait la suivante: la métaphore reste, par tous ses traits essentiels, un philosophème classique, un concept métaphysique. Elle est donc prise dans le champ qu'une métaphorologie générale de la philosophie voudrait dominer. Elle est

issue d'un réseau de philosophèmes qui correspondent eux-mêmes à des tropes ou à des figures et qui en sont contemporains ou systématiquement solidaires. Cette strate de tropes "instituteurs", cette couche de "premiers" philosophèmes (à supposer que les guillemets soient ici une précaution suffisante) ne se domine pas.<sup>1</sup>

While Derrida's exploration of the question of metaphor here and in other texts is extensive, the *limit* that he articulates here in its "impoverished" and "abstract" form is never actually denied, Derrida's discussion of metaphor can be understood, in his own words, as an attempt to "reconnaître en son principe la *condition d'impossibilité* d'un tel projet."<sup>2</sup> In short, if the concepts of philosophy are "contemporaneous to" or in "systematic solidarity" with a layer of tutelary tropes, of primary figures, then metaphoricity, in some sense of it at least, will always *precede* philosophy. Philosophy, therefore, has a limit, and cannot master metaphor. The question, then, becomes: What are the consequences of this limit for metaphor and propriety as such?

Derrida's work is always at some level a critical, or "deconstructive", engagement with metaphysics; the question of metaphor is one extension of this project, and it is safe to assume that the question of metaphor involves the question of metaphysics in a significant way. Due to this relation, these questions will lead into various of Derrida's texts, not only those that deal most explicitly with metaphor; for the problem of the limits of metaphor as Derrida

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<sup>1</sup> *Marges de la philosophie* [hereafter "*Marges*"], 261. English translations of Derrida's works cited in this essay will correspond with the English translations of these works as listed in the Bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

construes them ultimately corresponds with his overall project of delimiting and undermining – “deconstructing” – classical metaphysics. And although it may also to some extent be theoretically separable from this project, the question of metaphor fits in an interesting and productive way with other themes in Derrida’s work. The limits that mark the impossibility of philosophy’s mastering of metaphor are limits that will prove to bear upon the question of metaphysics as well, first and foremost in terms of the metaphysical premises that structure theories of language and meaning.

Along with “*La mythologie blanche*”, the essay “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” also plays a role in this analysis. “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” explores various facets of the inability of philosophy to master metaphor. Metaphor’s retreat (“*retrait*”) from the grasp of philosophy corresponds in multiple ways with the notion of *différance*, the intrinsic disruption of the central suppositions of metaphysics with respect to meaning and identity. Through the investigation, in Derrida’s texts, of the limits of the philosophical concept of metaphor, it is shown that the account of language based on traditional philosophical premises is surprisingly incomplete. “*La mythologie blanche*” and “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” are dense texts, with various elements of Derrida’s works brought to bear on a constellation of problems. Thus, part of our aim here will be to situate Derrida’s writings on metaphor within the scope of the rest of his texts, to re-articulate the movements in his writings on metaphor by relating them to the larger body of his work and to some of the concerns found therein.

“*La mythologie blanche*” is in part concerned with describing the concept of metaphor in its traditional features. However, throughout his texts, Derrida insists that multiplicity and division operates wherever unity is presupposed; and this would apply to the concept of metaphor as well. Thus one might hesitate before attempting to identify *the* concept of metaphor, or *the* metaphysical tradition that encompasses it, as though they were totalities with clear boundaries. Nevertheless, there is an extent to which metaphor as a concept can be outlined, by looking at its formulation in texts such as Aristotle’s; metaphor is a distinctly *philosophical* concept, which is dependent upon certain philosophical principles. But it can also be shown, by elaborating from the same texts, that the concept of metaphor, as it is determined by philosophy, inevitably results in a paradoxical relation to philosophical language. By exploring, in “*La mythologie blanche*”, the texts of various writers who have addressed the question of metaphor, Derrida draws out certain elements that are essential to the classical philosophical understanding of metaphor; but in a gesture that recurs persistently in Derrida’s work, he also shows that these elements undermine the very philosophical-theoretical structure of metaphor they are supposed to establish. This has been suggested already in the idea that due to the metaphoricity of the primary terms of philosophy it is impossible to master metaphor with philosophy. But this impossibility and its repercussions spread out, in Derrida’s analysis, and the question becomes much more complex. The concept of metaphor is shown to be “self-destructive” – a notion that will be

made clearer – but it must be emphasized here that it is the *concept* of metaphor, and not metaphor itself, that will retreat and self-destruct. I will proceed to review some of the principal elements of the traditional philosophical concept of metaphor, in order first to work out a sense of what is entailed under the general heading of “*the concept of metaphor*”, to tie together what gives it a continuity of some sort, so that I can proceed to explore how Derrida finds the philosophical concept of metaphor to be unstable in several ways. In the last part of the paper I will be concerned with metaphor’s *remainder*, with the possibility that Derrida sees for metaphor as it “exceeds” the traditional metaphysical concept.

## 2) The Concept of Metaphor

The question of metaphor leads back to Aristotle; “Il semble pourtant en avoir proposé la première mise en place systématique, celle qui en tout cas fut retenue comme telle avec les effets historiques les plus puissants.”<sup>3</sup> Here is Aristotle’s definition from the *Poetics*, as cited by Derrida:

“La métaphore (*metaphora*) est le transport (*epiphora*) à une chose d’un nom (*onomatos*) qui en désigne une autre (*allotriou*), transport du genre à l’espèce (*apo tou genous epi eidos*)

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 275

ou de l'espèce au genre (*apo tou eidous epi to genos*) ou de l'espèce à l'espèce (*apo tou eidous epi eidos*) ou d'après le rapport d'analogie (*è kata to analogon*)" (1457 b, tr. Budé).<sup>4</sup>

This definition, Derrida observes, is broad and inclusive, encompassing various kinds of figurative language, such as metonymy and synecdoche, that would later be separated into other categories. Starting with this definition Derrida works out the sense in which the concept of metaphor is a metaphysical concept, and a "philosopheme"; I will briefly retrace some of the main points of Derrida's discussion of Aristotle in "*La mythologie blanche*", to outline the "systematic situating" of metaphor that is found in Aristotle's texts.

Because, in Aristotle's definition above, "[m]etaphor consists in giving [*transport*"] the thing a name that belongs to something else", the condition of *nominalization* is essential to the possibility of metaphor, as are the correlated principles upon which the theory of the name depends. The name and the possibility of naming require a complete and independent signification; what Derrida sometimes calls a unity of meaning ("un unité de sens"<sup>5</sup>) In Derrida's words: "Tout mot qui résiste à cette nominalization demeurerait étranger à la métaphore. Or on ne peut nominaliser que ce qui prétend – ou qui dès lors prétend – à une signification complète et indépendante, ce qui est intelligible par soi-même, hors de toute relation syntaxique."<sup>6</sup> The notion of a "complete and independent signification" is thus a key component in metaphor; and a principle

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 278

of *univocity*, or *monosemism*, of “complete and independent signification”, will be a starting point for the study of metaphor.

The theory of the name has had an enduring privilege in theories of language; and it is essentially bound up with a “chain” of philosophical principles.

Le propre des noms, c’est de signifier quelque chose (*Ta de onomata semainei ti. Rhétorique III*, chap. X, tr. Fr. Garnier, p 349), un étant indépendant, identique à soi, et visé comme tel. C’est à ce point que la théorie du nom, telle qu’elle est impliquée par le concept de métaphore, s’articule à l’ontologie ... ce qui apparaît ici, c’est une certaine indissociabilité de système entre la valeur de métaphore et la chaîne métaphysique tenant ensemble les valeurs de discours, de voix, de nom, de signification, de sens, de représentation imitative, de ressemblance; ou, ... les valeurs de *logos*, *phonè semantikè*, *semainein*, *onoma*, *mimesis*, *homoiosis*.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of metaphor is constituted by the philosophical “chain” Derrida refers to here, which bears upon the discussion of metaphor wherever it surfaces. Indeed, these philosophical principles that structure metaphor have an influence on the western philosophical tradition that can hardly be overestimated. The principle of the discrete semantic unity, the “complete and independent signification”, is intertwined with ontology and semantics; to take one important example of this, the name or nominative word traditionally indicates ideas of

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

object rather than ideas of relation.<sup>8</sup> In order to grasp the determination of metaphor as a philosophical concept, the philosophical chain that orients it must be taken into account; and through this chain the question of metaphor becomes an entry into the problem of the priority of unity over relation and divisibility.

In broad strokes, I will now sketch out some of what Derrida covers in his analysis of Aristotle's account of metaphor. Aristotle's discussion of metaphor in the *Poetics* appears within a discussion of *mimesis*; *mimesis*, imitation, is thus the function of metaphor, which is a kind of poetic device. *Mimesis* depends upon the notion of likeness, *homoiosis*. A passage from Aristotle, cited by Derrida, states: "‘Bien faire des métaphores, c'est bien voir le semblable’ (*to gar eu metapherein to to homoion theorein estin*. 1459 a)."<sup>9</sup> Aristotle repeats this elsewhere, and specifies the incentive for using metaphors: "‘La métaphore, en effet, ne va pas sans procurer une certaine connaissance de la chose signifiée (*to semainomenon*), en raison de la ressemblance (*dia ten homoioteta*) qu'elle établit, car toutes les fois qu'on se sert de la métaphore on le fait en vue de quelque ressemblance."<sup>10</sup> Metaphor indicates resemblances. Governed by *homoiosis*, *mimesis* is thoroughly linked with truth, *aletheia*, as such. Derrida writes: "L'*homoiosis* n'est pas seulement constitutive de la valeur de vérité (*aletheia*) qui commande toute la chaîne, elle est ce sans quoi l'opération métaphorique est impossible"<sup>11</sup> Thus, for Aristotle, metaphor is an

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-301.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.



operation that participates in the movement of language towards truth. Derrida writes (on Aristotle's view): "La *mimesis* ainsi déterminée appartient au *logos* ... elle est liée à la possibilité du sens et de la vérité dans le discours." And further (still on the subject of Aristotle), "le *logos*, la *mimesis*, et l'*aletheia* sont ici une seule et même possibilité."<sup>12</sup> In *mimesis*, and therefore metaphor, in a relation of *homioiosis*, nature, *physis*, reflects itself in a movement of revelation of truth. In Derrida's words:

La condition de la métaphore (de la bonne et vraie métaphore) est la condition de la vérité. Il est donc normal que l'animal, privé de *logos*, de *phonè semantikè*, de *stoikheion*, etc., soit aussi incapable de *mimesis* ... Au début de la *Poétique*, la *mimesis* est posée en quelque sorte comme une possibilité propre à la *physis*. Celle-ci se révèle dans la *mimesis*, ou dans la poésie qui en est une espèce ... Elle appartient à la *physis*, ou si l'on préfère, celle-ci comprend son extériorité elle-même et son double. La *mimesis* est donc, en ce sens, un mouvement "naturel". Cette naturalité est réduite et confiée par Aristote à la parole de l'homme. Plutôt qu'une réduction, ce geste constitutif de la métaphysique et de l'humanisme est une détermination téléologique: la naturalité en général se dit, se rassemble, se connaît, s'apparaît, se mire et se "mime" *par excellence* est *en vérité* dans la nature humaine.<sup>13</sup>

Metaphor, as Aristotle views it, is a means to knowledge which is to be arrived at through *mimesis*. And, importantly, "as an effect of *mimesis* and *homioiosis*"<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-83.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

metaphor is essentially *analogical*. It performs its function best when it satisfactorily indicates an analogical relation. In this way, nature, *physis*, is revealed, through a teleological movement of language oriented towards truth. This movement is a possibility of *logos*, which is made present in *lexis* – which, in turn, has as its basis the semantic unity. This brings us back to metaphor, to “the element of metaphor”, the “first semantic unity” of the name.<sup>15</sup>

The semantic unity has been indicated as an element of the concept of metaphor. In the following passage, which Derrida cites in “*La mythologie blanche*”, Aristotle proclaims the incontestability of the principle of univocity:

“Il est d’ailleurs indifférent qu’on attribue plusieurs sens au même mot, si seulement ils sont en nombre limité, car à chaque définition pourrait être assigné un mot différent [...] Mais si on ne posait pas de limite et qu’on prétendît qu’il y eût une infinité de significations il est manifeste qu’il ne pourrait y avoir aucun raisonnement [discourse, définition, *logos*]. En effet, ne pas signifier une chose unique, c’est ne rien signifier du tout, et si les noms ne signifiaient rien, on ruinerait tout échange de pensée entre les hommes, et, en vérité, aussi avec soi-même; car on ne peut pas penser si on ne pense pas une chose unique; et, si on le peut, un seul nom pourra être assigné à cette chose. Qu’il soit donc entendu, ainsi que nous l’avons dit au début, que le nom possède un sens défini et une signification unique. (*Métaphysique* Γ 1006 a 30 b 15)”<sup>16</sup>

Reason, in Aristotle’s view, depends absolutely upon univocity, on meaning as discrete units. Indeed, reason and univocity seem to be almost indistinguishable.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

Language, which is a function of *logos*, is structured on distinct, whole meanings; and metaphor would seem to be no exception. Derrida writes, explaining Aristotle's theory: “[c]haque fois que la polysémie est irréductible, quand aucune unité de sens ne lui est même promise, on est hors de langage ... Le propre de l’homme, c’est sans doute de pouvoir faire des métaphors, mais pour vouloir dire quelque chose, et seulement une.”<sup>17</sup> Derrida argues that this ideal of univocity does not conflict with the fact of polysemy, which is always taken to be reducible to monosemy:

Aristote reconnaît qu’un mot peut avoir plusieurs sens. C’est un fait. Mais ce fait n’a droit de langage que dans la mesure où la polysémie est finie, où les différentes significations sont en nombre limité et surtout assez *distincte*, chacun restant une et identifiable. Le langage n’est ce qu’il est, langage, que pour autant qu’il peut alors maîtriser et analyser la polysémie. Sans reste.<sup>18</sup>

Univocity is taken to be indispensable for language, and necessary for reason and for philosophy. On the whole, it is a crucial concept, then, which plays an essential role in language as such. To focus in on this, the claim that “not to have one meaning is to have no meaning, and if words have no meaning, reasoning with other people, and indeed with oneself, has been annihilated”, must come under greater scrutiny. On the one hand, univocity is essential to the philosophical concept of metaphor as such, which is built upon the priority of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

name and the corresponding unity of meaning. Univocity is a principle – an axiom, even – that Derrida wants to challenge, to disrupt with an alternative account which interprets language, and metaphor, beyond the limits of univocity. For, ultimately, univocity, singular, present meaning, (to paraphrase Derrida writing on a similar theme) is philosophy’s impossible dream.

In spite of the weight it carries, univocity is an uncriticized principle on which philosophy relies; and it is a component of a conception of meaning that has remained essentially undisturbed since Aristotle’s judgment that if meanings were not discrete, obviously *logos* would be impossible. Unitary meanings are the building blocks of *logos*. The irreducibility of univocity is given emphasis in the rhetoric of Aristotle’s statement. Obviously (“il est manifeste que”), he says, any meaning must be one meaning: obvious, as though if it were inseparable from the concept of meaning itself. And indeed, meaning is always implicitly defined in a way that can be characterized as substantive. In both “natural language” and philosophic discourse, meaning is always taken to be reducible to single, whole meanings, able to be fully represented and apprehended.

Univocity is part of a traditional view of language that is *semantic*, privileging meaning over the signifier, and takes any meaning as such to be ultimately singular and whole. The system that constructs the concept of metaphor hinges on this major dichotomy: on one side, the signifier, whose role is (thought to be) secondary but nonetheless necessary; on the other side, meaning, the signified, the content, whose identity is supposed to be in no way dependent upon the signifier, the signifier merely presenting it in its plenitude.

The unity of meaning depends upon many other philosophical oppositions as well; but if “l’opposition du sens (signifié intemporel ou non spatial en tant que sens, en tant que contenu) à son signifiant”<sup>19</sup> were not firmly in place, if the lines between signifier and signified were not quite so clear – and this question plays an important role in Derrida’s analysis – then the univocity of meaning, in terms of the question of metaphor and beyond it, would be severely disrupted. For univocity demands units of meaning that are essentially *pure*, and that are not contingent upon any kind of play which would threaten their essential stability.

The concept of metaphor starts at the axis of the name and the unity of meaning. The principle of univocity, which is articulated in Aristotle, is part of the *telos* of language on which the semantic view of language depends; this principle bears a constant influence on philosophy and its desire for a full revelation of truth as “la vérité comme unité du *logos* et de la *phoné*.”<sup>20</sup> Ideally, “l’univocité est l’essence, ou mieux, le *telos* du langage” – and, moreover, “[c]et idéal aristotélicien, aucune philosophie, en tant que telle, n’y a jamais renoncé. Il est la philosophie.”<sup>21</sup> “Dans la vérité, le langage devrait se remplir, s’accomplir, s’actualiser jusqu’à s’effacer, sans aucun jeu possible, devant la chose (pensée) qui se manifeste proprement.”<sup>22</sup> The unity of meaning corresponds with the unity of things, of objects of thought, presented in language,

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<sup>19</sup> *Marges*, 271.

<sup>20</sup> *L’écriture et la différence*, 293.

<sup>21</sup> *Marges*, 295.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

a possibility of *logos*. The function of metaphor, as Derrida reads Aristotle, is to create a sort of detour in the bringing to light of truth that is normally, or ideally, played out in language. Understood as primarily analogical, metaphor is described by Aristotle as a means to knowledge; and in fact, there is a sense in which it is less immediately but more emphatically a means to knowledge than ordinary language, in which the word reveals the thing itself directly; the purpose of metaphor is to disclose true likenesses, and *homoiosis* is part of its necessity.

There is another side to this construction of metaphor: metaphor, with its element of play, presents a certain risk to the Aristotelian system of language and truth. When it comes to the place of metaphor in the Aristotelian philosophical system, a tension presents itself; this tension will prove to be a starting point for Derrida's view of metaphor.

La métaphore n'illustre pas seulement les possibilités générales ainsi décrites. Elle risque d'interrompre la plénitude sémantique à laquelle elle devrait appartenir. Marquant le moment du tour ou du détour pendant lequel le sens peut sembler s'aventurer tout seul, délié de la chose même que pourtant il vise, de la vérité qui l'accorde à son référent, la métaphore ouvre aussi l'errance du sémantique. Le sens d'un nom, au lieu de désigner la chose que le nom doit désigner habituellement, se porte ailleurs ... Par sa puissance de déplacement métaphorique, la signification sera dans une sorte de disponibilité, entre le non-sens

précédant le langage (elle a un sens) et la vérité du langage qui dirait la chose telle qu'elle est en elle-même, en acte, proprement.<sup>23</sup>

The detour that metaphor makes away from truth does not necessarily result back at the correspondence of meaning and referent, tied together under the name, which is necessary for the revelation of truth. Metaphor does not directly say the thing in its truth; and so, at variance with the classical teleology of language, it breaks with the correspondence between name, meaning and truth. And metaphor can miss the mark; there can be good metaphors and bad metaphors.<sup>24</sup> It makes a detour that can convey truth, but it is a dangerous route. This is a possibility because metaphor disrupts, while making use of, the standard mode of semantic referral, the usual relation of meaning to truth which is the proper function of language. In the case of metaphor, the meaning of a name loses, at least partly or momentarily, its tie to the thing, to its referent, and meaning becomes transferable and unsettled.

Not producing a direct relation to truth, metaphor is something less than a full part of language. On the one hand, for Aristotle (in Derrida's words), "[l]a métaphore, effet de *mimesis* et *d'homoiosis*, manifestation d'analogie, sera donc un moyen de connaissance. Subordonné mais certain."<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, however, Aristotle does not altogether trust metaphors; he also criticizes Plato

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-84.

for his use of metaphors, describing them as “hollow language”<sup>26</sup>; and he says that metaphorical expressions are always obscure.<sup>27</sup> In making its detour away from proper meaning, with the ideal aim of ending up at the saying of truth, of the thing *and* its analogical relation of likeness, metaphor risks ending up outside language, of never escaping the outside of language. And since only “nonmeaning” precedes language, the detour of metaphor seems to go through this “nonmeaning”. If metaphor was not less than a full part of language, a poetic device and a marginal operation, then the question of nonmeaning, or of something other than the normal correspondence between meaning and truth, might have to be accounted for *within* language. The “wandering of the semantic” that metaphor creates opens up the possibility of meaning as something *other than* relation to truth; and the opposition between whole, present meaning on the one hand and complete absence of meaning on the other, seems insufficiently explained in relation to the “wandering of the semantic” produced by metaphor.

The possibility that can be glimpsed here is that metaphor opens up a certain deviation within the system of which univocity is a part; and since univocity is a vastly important effect of the system of metaphysics, and bears much weight as a philosophical principle, the consequences of this could be far-reaching.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 301



But this first rift of metaphor from meaning as univocity is still a relatively limited one; there are other senses in which metaphor not only diverges within the boundaries of semantics and univocity, but actually has a decentering effect on the philosophical-theoretical system that determines it. Primarily by way of the question of metaphor, it is the concepts of meaning and propriety themselves which will come into question, and the disturbance that metaphor creates in that system will prove to be more than marginal. As I have begun to outline, metaphor, in its classical concept, is tied to the semantic, monosemic system of language, but metaphor will not stay within the bounds of the semantic. Furthermore, it will impel a reconsideration of the privileged role of the semantic in language, and its limits. Metaphor leads to this surprising result in several ways. To put it one way, the analysis of metaphor can be seen as an affirmation of the role of the *syntactic* in meaning – syntactic understood in a generalized sense that will be examined further. And this has the potential to disrupt the principle of univocity which is essential to traditional semantics in any form, in which meaning can only exist if *one thing* is meant, in which meaning, as such, can only be distinct and whole. The main concern in his analysis of the question of metaphor, and throughout the rest of Derrida's texts as well, is to affirm the necessary dependence of meaning on *systemic and structural difference*. This necessity, which philosophy has traditionally tried to ignore or suppress but which is nonetheless operative within its texts, obstructs univocity and ultimately shifts the question of metaphor into a new space.

### 3) The Circularity of the Definition of Metaphor

In opening, the idea was introduced that the analysis of metaphor in philosophy comes up against a problem of circularity. On the subject of Aristotle's definition of metaphor, Derrida writes:

Cette définition, la plus explicite sans doute, la plus précise et en tout cas la plus générale, pourrait s'analyser selon deux motifs. C'est une thèse philosophique sur la métaphore. C'est aussi un discours philosophique dont toute la surface est travaillée par une métaphorique.<sup>28</sup>

This passage condenses much of what unfolds over the course of "*La mythologie blanche*". Seen in light of this passage, there are, preliminarily, two aspects to this essay: 1) The description of this Aristotelian philosophical chain, the "system of interpretation" which plays a determining role in the formulation of the concept of metaphor by philosophy and rhetoric, and in terms of which the *concept* of metaphor is always a philosophical one. I have already begun to outline this theme. 2) The description of how this philosophical chain, and the concept of metaphor that is determined by it, already presupposes metaphor, depends upon metaphor, and cannot precede metaphoricity in order to master it. These aspects lead to a "self-destruction" of the concept of metaphor, to a thoroughly disrupted state for the concept of metaphor as such; in this self-

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 275-76.

destruction<sup>§</sup>, the concepts of metaphor and proper meaning become much less stable and certain. I will turn now to the second aspect; the first aspect will be relevant throughout the analysis.

“*La mythologie blanche*” examines the work of various writers who have sought to reveal the metaphorical “sedimentation” in philosophy. Derrida cites Anatole France, Renan, Nietzsche, Freud, and Bergson as having pursued this line of analysis. The discussion revolves around the following argument: all the abstract terms and concepts of philosophy and metaphysics seem to be metaphorical, as the origin of their meanings is in the physical or sensible. The concepts of philosophy always seem to carry with them some “kernel” of sensory data, a basis in the sensible which is forgotten, abstracted away from, or worn away (this image of wearing away through metaphor is part of the basis for the title “*La mythologie blanche*”). The example that Derrida examines most closely is Anatole France’s dialogue *The Garden of Epicurus*. By means of the logic implicit in this text, Derrida tells us, we can see “la configuration de notre problème, les conditions théoriques et historiques de son émergence.”<sup>29</sup> In *The Garden of Epicurus*, one of the interlocutors criticizes metaphysical language as having lost or “defaced by usage” the origins of meaning in physical experience; concepts that once had whole, tangible meanings that were directly connected to the world of sensory experience, to reality, lose their meaning and their value in being abstracted into metaphysical language. In Derrida’s description of this

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

dialogue: “Les deux interlocuteurs commercent précisément sur la figure sensible qui s’abrite et qui s’use, jusqu’à paraître inaperçue, dans chaque concept métaphysique. Les notions abstraites cachent toujours une figure sensible.”<sup>30</sup>

Derrida takes a certain distance from France’s argument to look at what constitutes its possibility. At one level, France’s text relies heavily on both the philosophical and the metaphorical, and thereby seems undermined on its own terms. The problems in managing the question of metaphor in philosophy that France’s text displays consequently underscores that it remains a significant problem. Is there a certain illegitimacy in the fact that apparently metaphorical elements of philosophical language are not recognized as such? “*La mythologie blanche*” takes up this problem, and puts into relief some of the metaphors with which any philosophical text always operates. Indeed, if the existence of a “physical origin” in philosophical concepts is an indication of their metaphoricity, the occurrences of “metaphorical sedimentation” in philosophy become surprisingly ubiquitous. Metaphoricity, broadly understood (following Aristotle) abounds in philosophy.

Not only are figurative, metaphorical expressions abundant (if metaphoricity is accepted as an accurate description of them), but even the most essential, “grounding” concepts of philosophy seem to be derived from a sensible meaning. By virtue of this, their claim to authority might seem to be shaken. Derrida writes:

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

Les difficultés que nous venons de signaler s'aggravent quand il s'agit des tropes "archaïques" qui ont donné aux concepts "fondateurs" (*theoria*, *eidos*, *logos*, etc.) les déterminations d'une langue "naturelle". Et déjà les signes (mots/concepts) dont est faite cette proposition, à commencer par ceux de trope et d'*arkhè*, ont leur charge métaphorique. Sont métaphoriques, résistent à toute méta-métaphorique, les valeurs de concept, de fondation, de théorie. N'insistons pas sur la métaphore optique ouvrant sous le soleil tout point de vue théorique.<sup>31</sup>

The problem here is striking; metaphors (if we accept them as such) based on visibility and vision alone, or what Derrida here calls the "optic metaphor", appear to be ubiquitous in philosophy – as he shrewdly puts it, opening up "every theoretical viewpoint under the sun." Looking back to Aristotle's discussion of metaphor, in which he characterizes metaphors as "obscure" and "hollow language", it becomes apparent that this analysis has been enmeshed in metaphor since it began. For, as Derrida rightfully asks: "Comment une connaissance ou un langage pourraient-ils être proprement clairs ou obscurs?" "L'appel aux critères de clarté et d'obscurité suffirait à confirmer ... [que] toute cette délimitation philosophique de la métaphore se laisse déjà construire et travailler par des 'métaphores'."<sup>32</sup> Philosophy is entangled with metaphor at its very foundations; for even in the concepts that organize philosophy, the concepts on which philosophy would seem to be "grounded", such as *theoria* (looking, viewing), *eidos* (form), and trope (turn) – not to mention *metaphora* (carrying)

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

itself – metaphoricity plays a role; and propriety, proper, literal meaning<sup>s</sup>, start to seem “groundless”. How, then, can philosophy master metaphor? The problem seems to be a fairly inescapable circularity. Metaphor is always already active in philosophy; philosophy can never contain metaphor, because metaphor, being active in the concepts that are used in the defining, always exceeds the definition.

As stated in the introduction to this paper, there is an extent to which Derrida accepts this as a limit, an indication of the impossibility of metaphor. Metaphor will not be mastered by philosophy. For one, the critique that seeks to uncover the metaphors that philosophy harbors within its concepts, itself employs metaphorical expressions, and philosophical distinctions and premises in which metaphor is implicated. These analyses do not escape the problem of metaphor in philosophy merely by taking it up. It is particularly in this respect that Derrida finds France’s text to be illustrative of the configuration of the problem; for France’s analysis rests on numerous philosophical premises, which lead to a range of issues that both organize and complicate the question of metaphor. Here is a summary Derrida gives of two initial difficulties that underlie France’s analysis:

Il suppose ainsi – motif classique, lieu commun du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle – qu’une pureté du langage sensible a pu avoir cours à l’origine du langage et que l’*etymon* d’un sens primitif reste toujours, quoique recouvert, assignable. [Et] cet étymologisme interprète la dégradation comme passage du physique au métaphysique. Il se sert donc d’une opposition toute

philosophique, qui a elle aussi son histoire et son histoire métaphorique, pour juger de ce que le philosophe ferait, sans le savoir, des métaphores.<sup>33</sup>

With respect to these concerns, the argument that begins and ends with the critique that philosophy is entangled in metaphor seems to be surprisingly oblivious to its own entanglement in the problem of metaphor and philosophy. While France wants to show that metaphor lurks in every metaphysical concept, it is evidently a network of metaphysical oppositions that structures this argument, and that constructs the very concept of metaphor that he employs. One such opposition is the sensible/intelligible opposition: a conceptual distinction which is thoroughly metaphysical. On this subject, Derrida cites Heidegger, explaining the latter's distrust of metaphors: “La notion de ‘transposition’ et de métaphore (*Metapher*) repose sur la distinction, pour ne pas dire la séparation, du sensible et du non-sensible comme de deux domaines substantiels chacun pour soi. ... Le métaphorique n’existe qu’à l’intérieur des frontières de la métaphysique.”<sup>34</sup> This connection with Heidegger and metaphysics will be pertinent here; however, Derrida stresses that in his own view the sensible/intelligible opposition is not the only, nor necessarily the most important distinction that determines metaphor.<sup>35</sup>

Another analysis of metaphor that is relevant here is Nietzsche's, who follows a similar line of thought to France's. The most well-known discussion

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<sup>33</sup> *Marges*, 250-51.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, fn.19, 269

<sup>35</sup> *Psyché*, 12

of metaphor by Nietzsche is found in the 1873 essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”. In this fiery essay, Nietzsche attacks philosophical knowledge, the truth of concepts, and the concept of truth:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.<sup>36</sup>

There is an apparent correspondence here with France’s analysis; but Nietzsche goes much further, finding metaphor behind not just the metaphysician’s lexicon, but throughout language, in any claim to “truth”. For Nietzsche, the relation of conceptual knowledge to the so-called “thing in itself” (the scare quotes are Nietzsche’s) is nothing more than metaphor, at multiple levels of remove from whatever it is we want to grasp.

The “thing in itself” (which is precisely what the pure truth, apart from any of its consequences, would be) is likewise something quite incomprehensible to the creator of language and something not in the least worth striving for ... To begin with, a nerve

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<sup>36</sup> *Philosophy and Truth*, 84.



stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor.<sup>37</sup>

It may be the case that Nietzsche's perspective on metaphor has a stronger influence on, or a closer proximity to, Derrida's analysis of the problem of metaphor than is immediately apparent. France's argument centers on the metaphoricity of the fundamental metaphysical concepts; for Nietzsche, metaphor is implicated at all levels of language and conceptualization. On the face of it, this might seem to be a puzzling use of the term "metaphor", and an extraordinarily broad one. Metaphor, in Nietzsche's view, is the condition even of the transfer of nerve stimulus to "image", and then again of the transfer of image to sound. Thus Nietzsche's argument goes much further than France's, putting metaphor well before the abstract metaphysical concept, and even before the word. In effect, it would seem that it is a new sense of metaphor that is being put into play. While perhaps not entirely avoiding the problems that complicate France's analysis – an apparent recourse to the philosophical principle of etymology, in terms of what Derrida calls the "*usure*" of metaphor, for instance – Nietzsche also seems to complicate the boundaries by which his argument would be delimited. For according to Nietzsche, there is no point at which human concepts or truths are free of metaphor. A consequence of this would seem to be that metaphor itself is a metaphor; so in Nietzsche's text the role of

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

metaphor is shifted to a fundamental position, while its identity becomes uncertain.

Whatever the extent to which it stays within or exceeds the framework of traditional philosophy, Nietzsche's argument puts metaphor at the root of conceptual distinctions, and thereby renders their status uncertain. If the process of conceptualization is already metaphorical, then the dislodging of the system of metaphysics by metaphor is far more profound than might have been expected. By finding metaphor at every step of language and conceptualization, Nietzsche seems to fracture the concept of metaphor, sending it throughout language, and expanding its borders. While this argument might appear to be, like France's, self-defeating, by pushing metaphor to its limits Nietzsche's notion of metaphor goes beyond its metaphysical concept, and indeed, beyond the norms of metaphysical conceptualization in general. It could be argued that in Derrida's analysis of the concept of metaphor he has reformulated Nietzsche's argument so that it fits with his own project – namely deconstruction – so that it achieves a coherence that might not be evident in Nietzsche's somewhat polemical essay. As I will show, the similarity between Nietzsche's argument and Derrida's analysis begins with metaphor's excess, its being pushed to its limits, to an almost paradoxical position. Through this movement, metaphor will come to be understood to be effective *prior* to any supposed non-metaphoricity. That the word, the concept, "proper meaning", are all first of all metaphorical – or that they are possible only on the condition of metaphoricity – could be the critical discovery made by Nietzsche that orients Derrida's analysis.

#### 4) Metaphysics as Analogical

Before exploring further this line of correspondence between Derrida's analysis and Nietzsche's, a detour will be taken here to examine another angle of the deconstruction of metaphor. This will involve a different aspect of the entanglement of metaphor and metaphysics, an entanglement which affects the limits of metaphor as a philosophical concept and the complicated nature of the relationship of metaphor and philosophy.

Much of the essay "*Le retrait de la métaphore*" deals with this other sense in which metaphysics and metaphor are intertwined. There is an extent to which the problem is based on the texts of Heidegger; but I will deal with this issue more in terms of what it indicates for Derrida's analysis, and not by engaging very closely with Heidegger's texts. The issue, based on an interpretation of Aristotelian metaphysics, is that metaphysics itself involves a kind of metaphorical or tropical movement, interpreting Being in terms of analogy. Being *itself* always withdraws, and is never present; instead there is always only the movement of Being *as* some thing (Derrida gives the examples: "l'être *comme* eidos, *comme* subjectité, *comme* volonté, *comme* travail, etc."<sup>38</sup>). Rodolphe Gasché describes this Heideggerean theme as the "*as-structure* of the understanding of Being."<sup>39</sup> The articulation of Being in language is an

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<sup>38</sup> *Psyché*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> *The Tain of the Mirror*, 299.

*analogical* articulation; Gasché explains that, for Aristotle, “whatever is related as a certain thing to another, and ‘bears to each other the same ratio or relation that another pair has’ (*osa ekei os allo pros allo*) is analogical ... it is such an equality that Aristotle claimed for his categories, and which, along with *on* and *ousia*, are ... the major senses in which being is said.”<sup>40</sup> And analogy, as previously discussed, is essentially linked with metaphor through the association of *homoiosis* and *analogy*: Derrida observes that, for Aristotle, “[l]’analogie est la métaphore par excellence”<sup>41</sup>; and that “[l]a métaphore, effet de *mimesis* et d’*homoiosis*, manifestation de l’analogie, sera donc un moyen de connaissance.”<sup>42</sup>

Metaphysics, naming things in their relations of likeness and resemblance, would therefore seem to be in a metaphoric relation with Being. And it would seem that Being, not being any *thing*, cannot be named *properly* at all, i.e., with a meaning that is whole and discrete, corresponding to a referent.

Le concept dit “métaphysique” de la métaphore appartiendrait à *la* métaphysique en tant que celle-ci correspond ... à un retrait suspensif de l’être, à ce que l’on traduit souvent par retrait, réserve, abriement, qu’il s’agisse de *Verborgenheit* (être-caché), de dissimulation ou de voilement (*Verhüllung*). L’être se retient, se dérobe, se soustrait, *se retire* (*sich entzieht*) dans ce mouvement de retrait qui est indissociable, selon Heidegger, du mouvement de la présence ou de la vérité.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *The Tain of the Mirror*, 298.

<sup>41</sup> *Marges*, 289.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>43</sup> *Psyché*, 79.

Heidegger looks at Aristotle's ontology, and by extension at metaphysics itself, as involving a semi-metaphorical or tropical movement. Being itself is always "in withdrawal", and it is only Being *as* such and such a thing that is manifested, and articulated by metaphysics. In this sense, it is the withdrawal of Being that creates the conditions for metaphor, a kind of "originary metaphor" wherein the proper meaning of Being withdraws, leaving only non propriety, or a kind of metaphoricity:

Se retirant en se montrant ou se déterminant *comme* ou *sous* ce mode d'être (par<sup>f</sup> exemple comme *eidos*, selon l'écart ou l'opposition visible/invisible qui construit l'*eidos* platonicien), qu'il se détermine donc en tant qu'*ontôs on* sous la forme d<sup>e</sup> l'*eidos* ou sous toute autre forme, il se soumet déjà, *autrement dit, pour ainsi dire, sozusagen, so to speak*, à un déplacement métaphorico-métonymique. ... On serait alors tenté de dire: le métaphysique, qui correspond en son discours au retrait de l'être, tend à rassembler, dans la ressemblance, tous ses écarts métonymique<sup>s</sup> en une grande métaphore de l'être ou de la vérité de l'être. Ce rassemblement serait *la* langue de *la* métaphysique.<sup>44</sup>

As Gasché puts it in his discussion of the problem: "all metaphysics, insofar as it is concerned with the unity in difference, must understand itself primarily as a philosophy of analogy." (*The Tain of the Mirror*, 296)<sup>45</sup> Metaphysics is *itself* metaphorical, in a generalized sense ("quasi"), with respect to Being; but as

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<sup>44</sup> *Psyché*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> *The Tain of the Mirror*, 296.

outlined, metaphysics, which is “lui-même quasi métaphorique au regard de l’être” (*Psyché*, 80)<sup>46</sup>, also produces the concept of metaphor with which we are attempting to characterize metaphysics. Metaphor, then, produced by metaphysics, is a philosophical concept “qui n’a de sens, lui-même, que strictement métaphorique.”<sup>47</sup>

But describing metaphysics as metaphorical is an impossibility, because the concept of metaphor is itself a metaphysical concept. As outlined above, metaphor is thoroughly constructed by a “philosophical chain” such as that which can be shown in Aristotle’s texts. Its function in the organization of language corresponds with the revealing of truth, with the notion of meaning which can be “transported”, and therefore the strict distinction between signifier and signified – all distinctly philosophical premises, which justify Derrida’s statement that metaphor is a “philosopheme”. So the question of Being, as Heidegger addresses it, in fact becomes a paradigmatic case of what Derrida calls “the abyss of metaphor”, and reveals a doubling of metaphor that deeply complicates the problem of its identity.

With a quasi-metaphorical metaphysics producing the concept of metaphor, a doubling up of metaphor occurs, a sense in which the question of metaphor leads to what Derrida calls an “abyss”, or to a kind of metaphoricity that cannot be satisfactorily enclosed in the parameters of the classical concept

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<sup>46</sup> *Psyché*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

of metaphor. Metaphor is itself “strictly metaphorical”; and so, at least in terms of the parameters of its traditional concept, it is rendered obscure and uncertain.

This intertwining of metaphor, analogy, and metaphysics is the terrain that “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” attempts to navigate; and the “abyss” of metaphor goes very deep. But before moving on to look further at “*Le retrait de la métaphore*”, the focus on the question of metaphor here must be broadened to include the notion of *différance* from other texts of Derrida’s. In *différance* and several of the important themes that relate to it, “*La mythologie blanche*” and “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” will find a valuable supplement, and this will help situate metaphor in the broader spectrum of Derrida’s writings.

### 5) *Différance*, Writing, and the Trace

The notion of *différance* might be the most prominent notion in Derrida’s work. It is based on the principle that language operates through the *effects of the play of differences*. Derrida draws this principle primarily from Saussure, who argued that all aspects of the sign, which comprises the signifier and the signified (or the meaning), is constituted by its difference from other signs. It is the differences in any code or system that define the terms, and only the differences. The following passage is from Saussure, cited by Derrida, and it presents this critical discovery:

“Si la partie conceptuelle de la valeur est constituée uniquement par des rapports et des différences avec les autres termes de la langue, on peut en dire autant de la partie matérielle ... Tout ce qui précède revient à dire que dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus ... dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs. Qu’on prenne le signifié ou le signifiant, la langue ne comporte ni de<sup>s</sup> idées ni des sons qui préexistaient au système linguistique, mais seulement des différences conceptuelles ou des différences phoniques issues de ce système. Ce qu’il y a d’idée ou de matière dans un signe importe moins que ce qu’il y a autour de lui dans les autres signes.”<sup>48</sup>

In language there are *only differences without positive terms*; neither meaning (concept, signified) nor signifier (what Saussure, calls “la partie matérielle”) can *precede* difference; no unity can precede the play of differences that is the basis the movement of (in Derrida’s words) “la langue, ou tout code, tout système de renvois en général”<sup>49</sup>. This will be the basis for the principle Derrida develops as *différance*. Difference is a structural necessity that precedes any kind of content or identity, whether it is of the signifier, or meaning, thought, or concept.

Let us consider a demonstration of the thrust of Saussure’s argument, taking as an example the letter ‘a’. What makes this mark identifiable and distinct from the other characters in language – is it some set of features that could be described and listed? The second part of the question can be answered only in the negative, for how could all the endless possibilities of variations on that particular letter be accounted for? From the innumerable varieties of

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<sup>48</sup> *Marges*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



typeface to the most disparate appearances in cursive writing, no list could be exhaustive; there is no set of properties that would finally define what constitutes the conditions of its appearance. In addition to the impossibility of describing all the instances that already exist, new instances of inscription with new differences would endlessly frustrate the project. The conclusion can only be along the lines of Saussure's: the word, the letter, the grapheme is constituted by *not* being any other; it is constituted by its difference within a system. What might be more surprising, but no less justifiable, is that, as Saussure argues, this is equally true for any component of language, including the idea, the content, or *meaning*.

In Derrida's view, however, Saussure's definition of the sign, which figures largely in his theory, depends upon certain traditional oppositions which are uncriticized and aligned with metaphysics. These oppositions start with the dichotomy that articulates the sign as signifier and signified, which inevitably draws on the distinction of sensible/intelligible, the privilege of the spoken or the *phonè* over the written, and other corresponding oppositions. In Derrida's analysis, Saussure moves towards overcoming this distinction, but falls short of doing so. It is with respect to this issue, among others, that Derrida calls for the transformation of Saussure's *semiology*, which is constructed as a theory of "the sign", into what Derrida calls a "*grammatology*": "celle-ci opérant un travail critique sur tout ce qui, dans la sémiologie et jusque dans son concept matriciel – le signe – retenait des présupposés métaphysiques incompatibles avec le motif

de la différence.”<sup>50</sup> A grammatology would be something like a science of *writing* or of the *mark*; these terms will come up again in this analysis, for through them the principle of difference is put into play. In order to move beyond the metaphysical suppositions that are woven into Saussure’s account, then, Derrida takes up the principle of difference discovered by Saussure and articulates it as *différance*, through such motifs as *writing* and the *mark*, so that it reaches beyond these oppositions and takes on a broader significance.

‘*Différance*’ is a neologism that combines difference and deferral: non-unity with respect to identity, and non-presence with respect to the present. In language, *différance* is the movement of difference and relation that is more “fundamental” (a concept which Derrida uses only with qualification) than identity. In the following passage Derrida outlines it in a relatively concise formulation:

Le jeu des différences suppose en effet des synthèses et des renvois qui interdisent qu’à aucun moment, en aucun sens, un élément simple soit *présent* en lui-même et ne renvoie qu’à lui-même. Que ce soit dans l’ordre du discours parlé ou du discours écrit, aucun élément ne peut fonctionner comme signe sans renvoyer à un autre élément qui lui-même n’est pas simplement présent. Cet enchaînement, fait que chaque “élément” – phonème ou graphème – se constitue à partir de la trace en lui des autres éléments de la chaîne ou du système. ... Rien, ni dans les éléments ni dans le système, n’est nulle part ni jamais simplement présent ou absent. (*Positions*, 38)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Marges*, 16.

<sup>51</sup> *Positions*, 38.

This principle of *différance* is the basis for a profound disruption of the philosophical view of language, of the semantic view which rests on monosemy and univocity, on whole, discrete elements of meaning. The statement bears repeating, in order not to underestimate its magnitude: any “element” – and it is significant that Derrida puts ‘element’ in scare quotes – is “constituted on the basis of the traces within it of other elements of the chain or system.” It would be difficult to imagine that this insight is compatible with the traditional semantic view of the essential unit of meaning in any straightforward way. A word, or a sign, is constituted, as Saussure claimed, not by being a simple, intact element, but rather only by virtue of *its relation* to what it is *not*; it is defined in terms of its relation to the other signs in the system and by its difference from them. Therefore, the fact of division and incompleteness takes priority over wholeness and presence.

The effects of Saussure’s principle of difference can be felt throughout Derrida’s texts. The shift in which difference is transformed into *différance* is brought about by Derrida’s merging of Saussure’s conclusions with an interpretation of Heidegger’s analysis of ontological difference. *Différance* and the various figures related to it form a critical response to what Derrida, borrowing from Heidegger’s analysis, describes as *presence*. To a great extent, the problem of presence as it appears in Derrida’s texts can be understood as an extension of Heidegger’s critique of this notion as a dominant presupposition in philosophy. Heidegger takes aim at the “vulgar” conception of time which

privileges the present (the now and the existing) in an uncriticized and continually recurring gesture. Derrida's general project is very similar to Heidegger's in this respect: through its various motifs, which include the trace, the *trait*, and writing, *différance* is aimed to deconstruct the uncriticized notion of presence that interprets Being in terms of identity and unity rather than in terms of difference and change. In this way Derrida expands what is elaborated primarily as a structural and linguistic analysis by Saussure, in order to take advantage of the pressure that the principle of *différance* is able to put upon philosophy and metaphysics. "[I]l n'y a pas de présence avant la différence sémiologique et hors d'elle"; it is the movement according to which language, or any code, is constituted "'historiquement' comme tissu de différences."<sup>52</sup> The movement of *différance* thus divides the present; and "presence" here refers to both temporality and identity. Difference, or *différance*, (the latter being an expansion and a quasi-formalization of the former) is in part the deferral of completion, and wholeness, of totality and presence. If any element of language cannot be unified and constituted except insofar as its unity depends upon a prior, more "fundamental" division and state of relation, then the element is never full and present in terms of what is demanded of it, as the name, the word, the unit of meaning, by the tradition of semantics.

Another basis for the fact of *différance* is *repetition*, or *iteration*. Any "signifier" (bearing in mind that there has been a disruption of the traditional conception of the sign), or any element of language, must bear the possibility of

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<sup>52</sup> *Marges*, 12-13.

its own repetition; this makes it identifiable, recognizable, allowing something like a continuity of signification. But the very fact of this repetition and iterability implies an essential *différance*, a differing and a deferring of totality or plenitude. Each utterance or inscription of a sign, and the possibility that always exists of yet *another* instance of inscription, has the result that the meaning of the sign – in the traditional sense of meaning, which is, the full, complete, present meaning – is never totally achieved. There is always the possibility of a new context of inscription, a new relation to the other signs in the system, and therefore a new differentially constituted meaning. In understanding this we have recourse, again, to the roots of Derrida's notion of *différance* in Saussure's principle of difference. If the full implications of the fact that signification is the play of differences in a field are taken into account, then it can only be the case that – since the field is never saturated, and another inscription is always possible, with a new set of structural differences and relations – signification does not stay still. It differs even from “itself”; its meaning, the fullness and presence of its meaning, is always deferred.

A striking outcome of *différance* is the reduction of meaning construed as pure interiority. The “exterior” of language (i.e., the marking of the sign, the signifier: what Saussure calls the material side of language) is traditionally treated as one part of a dichotomy: the subordinate, inferior part, merely carrying out the task of signifying the “inside” (the content, the meaning, etc). But the content, the “inside” of language, just as in the case of the “exterior”, can only

be thought in terms of a “fabric” of *differences*. When the logic of *différance* is followed to its fullest extent, the *mark* (or other similar terms) ends up being the most irreducible element in language, the only basis on which all aspects of language can be accounted for. If difference is that which determines an element, then ultimately this can only be explained by way of some *marking* of difference; without the marking of difference, as Saussure’s analysis showed, there is no constitution of identity. What disrupts whole, singular identity is difference as *traces* of difference: describable through structures like writing, marking, and textual relation. This difference cannot be circumvented; and it applies equally to signifier and signified. For if it is the case that it is through a relation of difference that an element is determined, there being no whole, present elements *outside* of difference, then the inside, the content, can only be established in the same terms as the outside; the “inside” is thereby effectively reduced to the “outside”.

Saussure’s analysis, in Derrida’s view, established this reduction, having marked, “contre la tradition, que le signifié était inséparable du signifiant, que le signifié et le signifiant sont les deux faces d’une seule et même production.”<sup>53</sup> This theme is given great emphasis, and it is an especially radical and consequential aspect of the theory of *différance*. For when difference *in every instance* precedes identity, the theoretical structure of a pure content, a pure expression which the signifier merely has the task of representing, becomes impracticable. Thus, through an analysis of language following the logic of

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<sup>53</sup> *Positions*, 28.

difference, the foundations of the classical conception of meaning are disrupted. In Derrida's analysis, only "exteriority" survives the collapse of this distinction, although this sense of exteriority would be a transformed one. Because nothing precedes the play of differences in language through marking, writing, or inscription, the "content" cannot be determined in a position that is not intertwined with the signifier and the relations of difference that determine it; for both signifier and signified are constituted by the same process, the process of marking, writing, inscription, of textuality. The ideality of meaning in its traditional form, which is inevitably conceived in terms of univocity, does not find harmony with the production of signification that *différance* describes. In Derrida's words:

cet effet de différence qu'est la structure d'opposition simple dedans-dehors et cet effet du langage qui le pousse à se représenter lui-même comme re-présentation ex-pressible, traduction au dehors de ce qui était constitué au-dedans. ... Dans la mesure où il y a déjà un *texte*, un réseau de renvois textuels à *d'autres* textes, une transformation textuelle dans laquelle chaque "terme" prétendument "simple" est marqué par la trace d'un autre, l'intériorité présumée du sens est déjà hors de soi.<sup>54</sup>

Thus, *différance* is irreconcilable with "logocentrism". This is Derrida's word to name the most general set of premises and presuppositions of Western metaphysics. "Logocentrism", in a few words, is the view that takes *logos*, or

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-46.

reason, to be superior and fundamental to all other aspects of language; it forms the teleological account of language that sees truth, “de la vérité comme unité du *logos* et de la *phonè*”<sup>55</sup>. The counterpart to the privileging of *logos* and its sole possibility in the human voice and the *phonè*, is the subordination of the signifier, writing, exteriority – and of difference, which can only be thought in these terms.

Derrida puts this irreducible marking, this irreducible exteriority, under the heading of *writing*/“archi-writing”, or *text*. This is a notion of writing that goes beyond the traditional, narrow sense of writing as the inscribing of words (but includes it, just as generalized *text* and the generalized *mark* include the narrow senses of those words), to signify the marking producing differentiation that is prior to any identity. Writing is the formal basis for *différance*, or something like a structure; it is, “comme la possibilité commune à tous les systèmes de signification, l’instance de la *trace instituée*.”<sup>56</sup> And because difference as such cannot be reduced to the system of *presence*, it exists only as *traces*. The signifying mark is always a mark *of relation*; as shown in Saussure’s formulation, signification is not an instance of the presentation of a positive value, but the marking of a relation to the rest of the system. Therefore, “[l]a différence n’étant jamais en elle-même, et par définition, une plénitude sensible, sa nécessité contredit l’allégation d’une essence naturellement phonique de la langue.”<sup>57</sup> As a marking of difference, it cannot be present, because difference is not substantial or whole in and of itself; and so its

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<sup>55</sup> *L’écriture et la différence*, 293.

<sup>56</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.



existence takes the form of the *trace* of difference. But if it is not present, neither is it absent; absence, Derrida notes, is merely the other part of the binary present/absent: and *différance* is the very *condition* for such a binary opposition.

But this last claim – that *différance* is the *condition* for the binary opposition present/absent – pushes the problematic of *différance* and *trace* even further. *Différance*, through its various forms (of which this is a rapid sketch, leaving out various aspects and articulations of *différance*), constitutes the possibility of the conceptual distinctions such as signified/signifier, the conceptual distinctions that organize language and philosophy. The trace does not just distinguish signs and meanings in a linguistic or similar code: “*La trace est la différence qui ouvre l’apparaître et la signification.*” “*La différence est donc la formation de la forme. Mais elle est d’autre part l’être-imprimé de l’empreinte.*”<sup>58</sup> So on the one hand, *différance* reduces all aspects of language to a kind of exteriority (as writing, marking, the *trace*); but on the other hand, these forms of *différance* make such oppositions as present/absent, possible.

Thus *différance*, as a philosophical principle of sorts, is in a unique position. All possibilities depend upon it; through the trace, “elle fonde l’opposition métaphysique entre le sensible et l’intelligible, puis entre signifiant et signifié, expression et contenu, etc.”<sup>59</sup>. But it also disrupts all that it would make possible: “*La différence produit ce qu’elle interdit, rend possible cela*

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<sup>58</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 95, 92.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

même qu'elle rend impossible."<sup>60</sup> It is evident that these various themes relate to each other; but the question of how and to what extent their collective functions and effects can be systematized is not a simple problem. Although the notions that articulate *différance* are not identical, they are closely intertwined. Derrida describes this as:

la chaîne dans laquelle la "différance" se laisse soumettre à un certain nombre de substitutions non synonymiques, selon la nécessité du contexte, ... la "réserve", à l'"archi-écriture", à l'"archi-trace", à l'"espacement" ... à la marge-marque-marche, etc.<sup>61</sup>

Does this "chain" of concepts constitute the origins of language? Not exactly; they are "archi-concepts", but they are not origins (*arkhè*) in the normal sense, because they are non-singular, and cannot be unified. They are the forms of difference "itself"; and due to the necessity of *différance*, they are more originary than origins (la trace est "l'origine de l'origine").<sup>62</sup> All conceptualization or language formation occurs on their basis; but writing is the marking of a divided origin, of difference as starting "line". When Derrida writes of "archi-writing" or "archi-trace", it is not the case that these are simply "originary" concepts, the origins of meaning and language: it is an ambivalent

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> *Marges*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 90.

gesture which is meant both to include the concept of origin, and to put it under “erasure” (“*rature*”).<sup>63</sup>

The concept of origin, *arkhè*, is an integral part of the philosophical chain of presence that I have begun to investigate, and it is a crucial question for *différance*. Not only writing and the trace, but all of the themes which have been encountered thus far that articulate *différance* have the effect of complicating the concept of origins, a concept which corresponds with the teleology of meaning as discussed in relation to Aristotle. The sense in which these notions are not origins *per se*, but are originary, might remain somewhat obscure at this point in the analysis. But the question is entirely relevant to the problem of metaphor. Along with the distinctions of signifier/signified, metaphor is constructed by the notion of *origin*, the origin which establishes *propriety* – though this in turn depends upon the separation of signifier/signified, for the proper origin is a possibility based on the continuity of *meaning*. What is metaphor if not a displacement of a meaning, via a displacement of the name, from its proper origins?

These components – including but not limited to the trace, inscription, mark, writing, and *différance* – form the basis for an account of language and meaning that is radically different from the account based on Aristotle that was outlined above. Ultimately, *différance* might make the traditional account of language impossible – or at least, reveal it to be incomplete. The various terms

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

that are at play here are essentially modes or articulations of *différance*; more specifically, they are modes of *différance* as *writing*. Translator Alan Bass writes in a footnote that “[a]ll these terms refer to writing and inscribe *différance* within themselves, as Derrida says, according to the context.”<sup>64</sup> This is a sound description of the structure of this chain. By arranging all these concepts – the trace, the *trait*, the mark, etc. – under the heading of writing, and qualifying their respective functions as effects of *différance*, a fairly effective framework takes shape within which the array of concepts that Derrida puts into circulation can be organized. This organization is supported by Derrida’s famous statement: “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”.<sup>65</sup> Once again, this is a broadened sense of “text”; and it could equally be said that everything is writing, or “archi-writing”: as “unity” marked by alterity. What each of these notions has in common is that what they illustrate division and non-simplicity; they bring about, as effects, words, meanings, and concepts, which arise out of non-singularity and are constituted by markings, traces of difference. “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” means that there is nothing before or beyond the textual play of differences that operates through writing and the mark.

Writing is a general term under which we can put the mark and the incision; and the trace is the mode in which *différance* has its effects. Language in any form (including speech) is always already writing – or, text. It is writing, or text, in the sense that it works from traces of *différance*. *Différance* is never

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<sup>64</sup> *Margins of Philosophy*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 227.

present, as simple and full identity in the “plenitude of its being”; and these articulations of *différance* would be originary, but for the sense that they are marks of division and relation, which precludes their being qualified as origins. With any given elements, *différance* emphasizes the “between” of them over the unity of each. The trace of difference belongs to neither one nor the other, but rather is the relation of their otherness. “*La trace est en effet l’origine absolue du sens en général. Ce qui revient à dire, encore une fois, qu’il n’y a pas d’origine absolue du sens en général. La trace est la différence qui ouvre l’apparaître et la signification.*”<sup>66</sup>

But in the context of *différance*, what becomes of proper meaning, or meaning generally? Derrida writes: “il faut poser la question du sens et de son origine dans la différence. Tel est le lieu d’une problématique de la *trace*.”<sup>67</sup> The complicated originality of *différance* and its relation to metaphor will guide the remainder of this analysis, as it inquires into where the deconstruction of metaphor leads.

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<sup>66</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 95.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

## 6) *Le retrait*

Returning to the subject of metaphor: so far this investigation has shown metaphor to be “quasi-metaphorical” itself; due to its unavoidable circularity, it “withdraws” from the propriety of its concept, no longer being properly named. Its effects operate even upon the terms ‘proper’, ‘concept’, and ‘metaphor’; but by virtue of these very terms, it has been produced and defined by metaphysics. And in Heidegger's analysis, metaphor has been produced through the *metaphorical* movement of metaphysics. If ‘metaphor’ does not name a proper meaning, then metaphor itself is (though problematically) metaphorical. In its excess, “la métaphoricité ne se laisse plus contenir dans son concept dit ‘métaphysique’.”<sup>68</sup> So what becomes of “metaphor”, if it is not rendered totally enigmatic? To manage the result of metaphor's withdrawal, the exceeding of its classical metaphysical concept, the “figure” of the *retrait* indicates a sense of metaphor that is related to the “self-destructions” that have been encountered, producing a transformed sense of metaphor that reaches beyond the metaphysical concept.

As Nietzsche indicates, metaphor pervades language, marking every concept. In “*Le retrait de la métaphore*”, Derrida links up this idea with Heidegger and the question of the analogy of Being. Through the notion of the “*retrait*” of metaphor, a relationship between metaphor and *différance* is established, hinging on the trace; both the *withdrawal* of metaphor and its

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<sup>68</sup> *Psyché*, 82.

*marking* function are brought together here, and will be shown to run parallel to the effects of *différance*. But this is not to say that Derrida's analysis of metaphor is simply derivative of the theory of *différance*. Instead, metaphor seems to be one particular problem that leads to *différance*.

Metaphor marks, and re-marks supplementarily, every text, every statement, in "natural language" or "philosophical language", with metaphoricity, establishing a circularity, a metaphorical feedback-loop, creating the impossibility of a *meta*-metaphorics, of a total account or containment of metaphor. The various aspects of this movement are gathered under the motif of the *retrait*. The multiple possibilities of meaning in the word *retrait* – the movement of withdrawal, as the withdrawal (i.e. impossibility) of the concept of metaphor itself suggested by the literal meaning, and that which the word signifies in its parts, as *re-trait* – illustrate the range of dynamics that arise in struggling with the question of metaphor in philosophy. In its parts, *re-trait*, Derrida describes at once the marking (*trait*) of metaphor which is a *supplementary* marking (*re-trait*); and the "withdrawal" – i.e., non-presence, non-identity, etc. – of this marking, as well.

The marking *trait* indicates the inscription or the quality of *metaphoricity*; but it is a mark which is both "supplementary" and elusive, as indicated by the "re" (as in both senses: "back" and "again"). One sense in which this is a supplementary marking stems from metaphor reaching beyond the concept which is supposed to hold it, and charging that which tries to contain it: at some level, any attempt at circumscribing metaphor requires metaphor in the defining,

and thus there is always a surplus of metaphor that marks the definition with another *trait*. And at the same time, as “*La mythologie blanche*” illustrated, metaphor also withdraws, spreads its reach and cannot be circumscribed; exceeding its definition, it performs a *retrait* in the more literal sense of the word, a “withdrawal”. The other sense of *re-trait*, the *withdrawal of the mark*, as mark of metaphor, remains to be “properly” understood. In this aspect of *re-trait*, the mark effaces itself, and withdraws, leaving a marking that is not present. Thus, the *retrait* encompasses and connects different aspects of what Derrida also calls the *generalization* of metaphor, and the dimensions of the word *retrait* start to double up on each other. Metaphor appears at once more effective than ever, and less distinct. The *retrait*, in these senses (which are metaphorically charged themselves), indicates the difficulties metaphor presents for philosophy that attempts to control it; and they also point to a constructive outcome, a possibility for metaphor other than its containment by philosophy (an impossibility). But these aspects of the movement of metaphor, and particularly its marking, remain somewhat obscure. Metaphor as a philosophical concept has a limit that has been recognized, in different ways, by France, Nietzsche, and Derrida. But what exactly is this marking, the *trait* of metaphor, and what is its significance?

The *trait* in “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” has a strong connection with Heidegger. The notion of the *Riss* appears in Heidegger’s texts, and as Derrida adapts it, can be understood as that which constitutes the relation between words or concepts. Derrida interprets the notion of the *Riss* as *trait*: the *Riss*, Derrida



explains, is a term with great significance in Heidegger's texts, and is discussed in terms of *voisinage* and proximity – in the case discussed in “*Le retrait de la métaphore*”, the relation between the concepts of *Denken* and *Dichten*, translated as thought and poetry. The French word ‘*trait*’ is defined as trace, marking, line, and characteristic; but the German ‘*Riss*’ gives a slightly different emphasis, also signifying a tear, an incision, a gap, a schism. Linked with *Riss*, then, the *retrait* brings together the themes of marking, withdrawal, and relation. It becomes clear that this relation of difference and proximity, marked by the *Riss/trait*, is nothing other than an inscription of difference. On the basis of Heidegger's comments on the relation between thought and poetry, Derrida elaborates:

... le trait avoisinant, disons le trait *approchant*, le trait propre qui rapporte (*bezieht*) l'une à l'autre *Dichten* ... et pensée (*Denken*) en leur proximité avoisinante, qui les partage et que les deux *partagent*, ce trait commun différentiel qui les attire réciproquement, tout en signant leur différence irréductible, ce trait, c'est le *trait: Riss*, tracement de frayage qui incise, déchire, marque l'écart, la limite, la marge, la marque ...<sup>69</sup>

The *re-trait* in the sense developed in this essay is a mark of a constitutive *relation* between concepts: the mark of the *trait*. This relation can be interpreted as one of proximity. *Prima facie*, the notion of proximity would suggest nearness; but proximity also requires *distanciation* (but “not separate, if separate

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<sup>69</sup> *Psyché*, 87.

signifies ‘to be distanced in the unrelated’”<sup>70</sup>). “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” works on the idea that the relation between concepts, their proximity and difference, has a fundamental bearing upon the propriety, the proper meaning, of each. This is obviously an extension of Saussure’s idea of the role of difference in establishing identity, using the *trait* here to articulate a marking of relation. In the following passage, *incision* is another term that indicates this marking, and it too is closely linked with, if not indistinguishable from, the *trait*. The issue here is still the relation of the proximity of two concepts, *Dichten* and *Denken*:

L’approchement est l’*Ereignis* qui renvoie *Dichten* et *Denken* dans le propre (*in das Eigene*) de leur essence (*Wesen*). Le trait de l’entame, donc, marque l’*Ereignis* comme appropriation, événement de appropriation. Il ne précède pas les deux propres qu’il fait venir à leur propriété, car il n’est rien sans eux. ... Dès lors qu’il se retire en se tirant, le trait est *a priori* retrait, inapparence, effacement de la marque de son entame.<sup>71</sup>

The *trait* is another term for that which *marks* the structural relation of difference; and again, the crucial idea here, which follows from Saussure’s discovery, is that *the propriety of each is constituted through this marking of difference*. The *trait* marks proximity and difference, and by doing so it *situates* each concept in its propriety.

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Derrida's description of the *retrait*, while sometimes elliptical, playing on its multiple senses at once, has marked parallels with the notion of the *trace*. As Derrida describes in the passage above the *trait* "is *a priori* withdrawal, unappearance, and effacement of its mark in its incision". The *trait* does not refer to what is normally associated with a mark, which would have identity and presence; rather, it is the "effacement" of the mark, as it withdraws from being present. In this sense, the 're' of *retrait* indicates the *same movement* of withdrawal as does the trace. The mark and the *trait* are not present for essentially the same reason that was described by Saussure, in semiological terms: they are not existent things, insofar as they articulate division and difference itself. It is the "between" of concepts, the relation of otherness through which each term is defined, which can only be described as marking, but which must not be mistaken for a present, unchanging entity.

N'étant rien, [le trait] n'apparaît pas lui-même, il n'a aucune phénoménalité propre et indépendante, et ne se montrant pas, il se retire, il est structurellement en retrait, comme écart, ouverture, différentialité, trace, bordure, traction, effraction etc. . . . Son inscription, comme j'ai tenté de l'articuler de la trace ou de la différence, *n'arrive qu'à s'effacer*.<sup>72</sup>

On top of the obvious lexical similarity, then, it is clear that the *trait* is similar to the trace in the context of *différance* insofar as they both combine the senses of *marking* and *withdrawal*. Thus, as a form of the trace, the *trait* plays a double

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<sup>72</sup> *Psyché*, 88-89.

role in language. In its necessity, it *precludes* any simple identity, any full presence. But, to interpret its function constructively, as one of creating possibility of meaning by marking difference, the *trait establishes* the propriety of a word, its “home”, and its relation to others:

Et se trait (*Riss*) est une *coupe* que se font, quelque part à l’infini, les deux voisins, *Denken und Dichten*. A l’entaille de cette coupe, ils s’ouvrent, pourrait-on dire, l’un à l’autre, ils s’ouvrent de leur différence et même, pour me servir d’un mot dont j’ai ailleurs ... tenté de régler l’usage, *se recoupent* de leur trait et donc de leur retrait respectif.<sup>73</sup>

The definition and the function of the *trait* clearly tie in with *différance*, and with the other themes that recur throughout Derrida’s texts which are organized around it. It is the mark of relation; it is not present or singular; it is a condition of identity and propriety. But it remains to be more precisely determined how the *trait*, as it relates to the *trace* (and therefore to the other pivotal “archi-concepts” that are used throughout his texts to “deconstruct” traditional philosophical themes), is a *trait* of *metaphor*, and what this would mean vis-à-vis *différance*. If metaphor has been exceeded, what is the significance of the marking of metaphor as trait, or of trait as metaphor?

Derrida tells us that the *trait* is the trace of an incision, and therefore these figures, the *trait*, the trace, and the incision, are all interconnected in this discussion. They are components of a necessary connection of difference

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<sup>73</sup> *Psyché*, 87.

between a pair of concepts – *Dichten* and *Denken*, from Heidegger's discussion. This connection is essentially a drawing of each into the proximity of the other, *in its difference*. It is not inconsequential that in this case the *trait* of metaphor divides and marks *thought* and *poetry*: for the distinction between thought and poetry corresponds directly with the traditional, philosophical structure of metaphor. The tension between metaphor as a poetic device, or an ornament, and its uncertain role in presenting truth is based on the distinction of poetic language from philosophical language, the language which strives to be a pure conduit for truth. In "*Le retrait de la métaphore*", the fact that the distinction between *Dichten* and *Denken* is an essential division for the concept of metaphor, is a theme that remains almost a subtext; Derrida leaves the connection to be interpreted. But it is stated that the *trait* of metaphor, and the *retrait* of metaphor, are part of the relation between that particular pair of concepts, as distinct from each other. So if the *trait*, which is in some sense a *trait of metaphor*, is the condition for the appearance of the thought/poetry distinction, then here again it is demonstrated that metaphor *precedes* propriety, even in terms of the very structure that would define metaphor.

But furthermore, the *trait*, as *trait* of metaphor, operates between conceptual oppositions other than thought and poetry: "Si 'la' métaphysique avait une unité, ce serait le régime de ces oppositions qui n'apparaît et ne se détermine qu'à *partir* du retrait du trait, du retrait du retrait, etc."<sup>74</sup> When Derrida states that the very system of oppositions that make up metaphysics

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<sup>74</sup> *Psyché*, 89.

depends on the *trait* and on the *retrait*, this withdrawal could be considered as a retreat of the *trait* of metaphor, to a position of “primordiality” – a complicated primordiality of the kind shown in the trace, writing, and the mark. The *trait* would be the “origin” of the two (*Dichten* and *Denken*) “si un trait pouvait être quelque chose, pouvait être proprement et pleinement originaire.”<sup>75</sup> The *trait* and the trace are necessary for language and for the propriety of meaning; they are the preconditions for the unity of the word, the name, the concept – or at least of the *possibility* of their unity. The trait of *différance* plays a role even more originary than the system of oppositions that constitutes metaphysics. The principle that started with Saussure applies just as forcefully here at this level: as a *system* of conceptual oppositions, metaphysics and its conceptual distinctions such as proper/literal, thought/poetry, signifier/signified, etc., are possible only insofar as they are constituted by differences within a system. Difference is the condition of their unity, and of their appearance. Indeed, the oppositions of metaphysics might be the example *par excellence* of the differential principle at work through the *trait*; for these concepts, existing as they do by virtue of a binary relation, most conspicuously have their identity constituted by the fact of their difference from their opposites. The binaries that make up metaphysics are the consummate case of the necessity of difference in establishing identity, for no one of its terms can be thought or produced without the inclusion of the difference of its other. In this case as well, what remains to be seen, what cannot be explained strictly on the basis of *différance*, is how metaphor plays into this

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

conceptual organization of philosophy. Through its withdrawal and expansion it has been shown that its effects occur everywhere; but *retrait* seems to be aiming at a specific account of this marking, a description of the formative role of a *trait* which is metaphorical.

The function of the *trait*, then, seems to be specifically in terms of *propriety*: the function of making proper meaning possible by inscribing the differences from other concepts within a given concept – or perhaps more accurately, between given concepts. But as shown earlier, the *trait* also seems to establish a *limit* or an *impossibility* as well – as do, for that matter, the other “archi-concepts” that have been discussed. The withdrawal of metaphor, Derrida warns, “ne laisse pas la place libre à un discours du propre ou du littéral”<sup>76</sup>; and in this way the effects of the withdrawal of metaphor, the *retrait*, are similar to the effects of the *trace*, the mark, and of *différance* generally, which make unity possible and disrupt it. Which is to say that the account of their effects seems to be ambiguous, or paradoxical. If we look at his account in a broader focus, Derrida falls short of consistently, categorically maintaining that the “archi-concepts” are the necessary conditions for language and meaning. Instead, he tends to waver in his emphasis, between characterizing their role in language as conditions of “possibility”, and portraying them as *limits*, as necessities which *interfere* with any traditional determination of the aspects of language; or else he combines the two positions at once: the traditional determinations are both possible and impossible. After a section in which Derrida (still in the context of

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<sup>76</sup> *Psyché*, 80.

a discussion of Heidegger) discusses the *trait* as relation of inscription, as that which makes propriety possible (“sending” concepts “into the proper of their essence”), he cautions, referring to Heidegger: “Mais il faut, et c’est le plus énigmatique de ce cercle, revenir où nous sommes sans y être proprement”.<sup>77</sup> Through the motifs of *différance*, it has been explained what propriety necessarily consists in – namely, difference via traces. But while *différance* clearly has a function of necessity, it seems that the propriety that *depends upon it* remains elusive.

Here it seems advisable to consider further the seemingly ambivalent gesture that is at work here; to do so I will circle back a bit. In terms of *writing*, Derrida has demonstrated the necessity of the shift from the notion of a “pure content” and discrete elements of sense, to an essential *divergence* of sense which is only composed, and decomposed, by *traces*. The fact that there are no “positive” values in language but only systemic differences, or traces of differences – in other words, text, in other words, writing – can be taken to mean that all aspects of the movement of language, including meaning, are reduced to plays of *signifiers*. The signifier is identified by the mark, writing, the trace, the *trait*; and all these are elements of *exteriority*, of marking and relation rather than of pure content. In light of this reduction, the semantic view of language, with its emphasis on the nominative word and the unity of meaning, and the corresponding concepts of propriety and metaphor, now appears inadequate.

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<sup>77</sup> *Psyché*, 85.



Discussing a specific case of this inadequacy. Derrida writes:

Le propre nom n'échappe pas à l'espacement, qu'il soit relié par son origine à des représentations de choses dans l'espace ou qu'il reste pris dans un système de différences phoniques ou de classification sociale apparemment délié de l'espace courant. La métaphore travaille le nom propre. Le sens propre n'existe pas, son "apparence" est une fonction nécessaire – et qu'il faut analyser comme telle – dans le système des différences et des métaphores.<sup>78</sup>

Later, he writes of "la rature constituante du nom propre dans ce que nous avons appelé l'archi-écriture, c'est-à-dire dans le jeu de la différence."<sup>79</sup> It is of interest to us here that these passages suggest ways that *metaphor*, specifically, will be explained vis-à-vis trace, *trait*, and *différance*; but before following this connection, it is worth considering the emphasis that these passages, and others like it, appear to give to the incompatibility of irreducible difference and the structures that depend on it. From Derrida's various descriptions, these forms of *différance* seem to have a curiously ambivalent force upon the conceptual structure that is rooted in metaphysics, the conceptual structure that defines language, proper meaning, and so on. For claims such as these give further evidence that the various modes of *différance* produce effects of *disruption* at

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<sup>78</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 136.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

least as much as they create *possibility* in relation to linguistic concepts such as “proper meaning”.

That metaphor “shapes and undermines the proper name” suggest<sup>5</sup> a disruption of the proper name so drastic that its outcome is indeterminate. In light of the complexity of the analysis in “*La mythologie blanche*” and “*Le retrait de la métaphore*”, such a strong, far-reaching statement about the role of metaphor in the previous citation, that proper meaning “does not exist” – might seem somewhat incongruous. In fact, the generality of this statement seems to ↪ be surprisingly close to Nietzsche’s position in “On Truth and Falsity in a Nonmoral Sense”. But is this position, taken from *De la grammatologie*, actually more radical than what “*La mythologie blanche*” or “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” suggests? Since *De la grammatologie* was written before “*La mythologie blanche*”, and well before “*Le retrait de la métaphore*”, a possible explanation is that at the time *De la grammatologie* was written, Derrida simply hadn’t explored the question of metaphor at length, and that the two later essays are more accurate representations of his position on metaphor. However, little in either of these later texts really contradicts the claim in *De la grammatologie*; there are more passages in these works that could be used to support the claim, and there are other relevant continuities between the texts (in terms of the *trace*, for example, which features largely in *De la grammatologie*, and its similarity to the *trait* in “*Retrait*”) that it should be considered to apply to the analysis of metaphor here.

If proper meaning does not in fact “exist”, as Derrida says, the question presents itself again: in what sense can metaphor “exist”? Derrida gives a possible answer to this in *La dissémination*, discussing the ambivalences in a text by Mallarmé: “Tout devenant métaphorique, il n’y a plus de sens propre et donc plus de métaphore.”<sup>80</sup> For one, if proper meaning were obstructed, there would be no proper meaning for the word ‘metaphor’. Moreover, wouldn’t *any* definition of metaphor require a corresponding notion of literal, proper meaning, from which metaphor would be a divergence? Indeed, it has been stated and shown that the *retrait* of metaphor “ne laisse pas la place libre à un discours du propre ou du littéral”; the circularity remains unavoidable. If the *retrait* of metaphor is ultimately paradoxical, this analysis should take care not to misrepresent that fact. In this respect, the following passage should also be considered. Derrida writes that his “final intention” in *De la grammatologie* is to “[r]endre énigmatique ce que l’on croit entendre sous les noms de proximité, d’immédiateté, de présence (le proche, le propre et le pré- de la présence)”.<sup>81</sup> Does enigma figure in to the analysis of metaphor, and is there a point at which the hope of stabilizing either metaphor or proper meaning should be abandoned? Two immediate responses should be made to this. One is that the fact that the stated goal in *De la grammatologie* is to make these words enigmatic does not mean that they are not to be “reconstructed” in a different text. This could be explained with reference to Derrida’s description of the two steps of the

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<sup>80</sup> *La dissémination*, 290.

<sup>81</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 103.

deconstructive gesture; the deconstructive phase and the reinscription.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, if Derrida's treatment of certain concepts is to render them enigmatic (recall, for another example, the statement from the discussion of the *trait* and proximity, that "it is necessary (and this is what is most *enigmatic* about this circle) to come back to where we are without properly being there"), it may <sup>be</sup> a <sup>^</sup> particular sense of enigma, or paradox, that is being invoked, one that does not necessarily reduce the concept to sheer mystery or meaninglessness. In light of the fact that Derrida's entire analysis of metaphor takes place within the recognized *limits* that the question of metaphor quickly comes up against, it would seem that within these limits, within the apparent paradoxicality, there is much ground to be covered.

Another response to this is that for Derrida, establishing the status of "non-existence" can often be construed as the affirming of a possibility of a different determination than that which the philosophical concept of "existence" would entail – namely, presence, totality, etc. In the rest of the passage that proclaims that proper meaning does not *exist*, it is also stated that literal, *propre*, meaning does in fact make an *appearance*, and that its appearance is a *necessary function in the system of differences and metaphors*. It is not at all clear that literal, *propre*, meaning is abolished or negated in this movement. Its non-"existence" does not reduce it to oblivion, as if it were something like a discredited concept (if such a thing could be imagined); something survives its disruption. It has been established that it is a matter of internal division,

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<sup>82</sup> See Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 163-76, for a discussion of these phases.

*différance*, which prevents proper meaning from existing whole, present, and autonomous. While bearing in mind the tension here, what must be determined further is the nature of this appearance and its relation to metaphor.

The nature of literal meaning, whether construed as possibility or impossibility, is to be understood in its relation to difference, and to metaphor. This has to do with an *obscurity* of literal meaning and the fact that proper meaning cannot exist on its own, as such, *without* its being implicated in metaphor or metaphoricity. This would not seem to be as strong a position as the one stated in *Of Grammatology* (proper meaning does not exist, is a function of metaphors), but from a certain perspective they are not entirely inconsistent. This brings me to the main hypothesis of this analysis, which concerns the sense of metaphor in Derrida's texts which exceeds the traditional concept of metaphor, the notion of metaphor that can be understood in spite of – or perhaps, due to – the withdrawal and generalization that metaphor carries out (or that carries out metaphor). This hypothesis may not be particularly bold, for it seeks merely to interpret the theme that runs explicitly throughout Derrida's texts on metaphor; but although it is not hidden, the deconstruction of metaphor and its outcome vis-à-vis proper meaning is multifaceted, complex, and structured in such a way that makes accounting for it difficult. I hope to contextualize this outcome of metaphor, which can no longer be thought to be strictly identical with the philosophical concept of metaphor. It is this other sense of metaphor, I believe, that is intended when Derrida writes, for example, that “[m]etaphor shapes and undermines the proper name”. The appellation “metaphor” may in many cases,

through Derrida's analysis, come to be a way to describe how metaphor, after it has been deconstructed, or pushed in its own logic to the point that it comes apart ("self-destructs", withdraws and/or generalizes) – how metaphor remains through its generalization and its retreat, to be redefined or "reinscribed". This sense of metaphor is closely related to the trace of *différance*, at least insofar as the function it performs (*re-trait*) is related to the dividing and withdrawing movement of the trace that is found in *Of Grammatology*, *Spurs*, and other texts. "*Le retrait de la métaphore*" has indicated many correspondences between *trait*, trace, mark, etc.; and a further commonality between *trait* (as *trait* of metaphor) and *différance* in general seems to be this apparent ambivalence between possibility and impossibility vis-à-vis language and conceptual opposition. *Différance* and metaphor, through *trait* and traces, are involved in the same movement.

Having arrived at this point, this analysis is better equipped to respond to the following question: In what way is the *trait* as it has been outlined, as a *trait* of relation that marks difference and proximity between concepts, a *trait* of *metaphor*? What relation does *metaphor* "as such" have with the *trait*, the relation of difference between words, concepts, meanings? The analysis of metaphor leads Derrida to the problem of the "between" of words, concepts, and meanings, so perhaps metaphor itself might come to be seen as a mode of differentiation, a mode of *différance*. In this case, what would be *precisely* the relation of metaphor to the trace and to writing? If metaphor is in fact an "archi-

concept” that corresponds with the trace, the mark, etc., will it be possible to define it to the same extent as these others have been defined by Derrida?

Another passage will help to direct us from here: in “*Le retrait*” Derrida cites Heidegger, who says, “L’unité cherchée de l’essence de la *Sprache*, qu’elle s’appelle l’entame.”<sup>83</sup> It is somewhere between this position, which says that language is made possible through difference, and the position that renders metaphor and proper meaning enigmatic, that the correct understanding of metaphor, as a Derridean concept, is situated.

### 7) *Différance*, detour, and metaphor

If metaphor is to be understood in relation to *différance*, a relation that the *trait* has indicated, it must also be thought in terms of its antagonistic relation to what Derrida calls “philosophy’s unique thesis”: that the sense aimed at through its metaphors

est une essence rigoureusement indépendante de ce qui la transporte, ce qui est un *thèse*, déjà, philosophique, on pourrait même dire l’*unique thèse* de la philosophie, celle qui constitue le concept de métaphore, l’opposition du propre et du non-propre, de l’essence et de l’accident, de l’intuition et du discours, de la pensée et du langage, de l’intelligible et du

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<sup>83</sup> *Psyché*, 89-90. + *À l’entame* — ?

sensible, etc.<sup>84</sup>

Through *différance*, it is revealed “against the tradition” that sense is not, in fact, an independent essence which is autonomous from the signifier; that this notion of the “pure signified” is unsustainable; and that signified, meaning, and idea are already in the position of textual difference. All of these effects of *différance*, and others as well, would create their own displacement of the traditional concept of metaphor, aside from metaphor’s deconstruction on its own basis, which has been explored thus far. But while Aristotle’s definition does not manage to entirely keep its hold on metaphor, metaphor or something like it nonetheless returns, and re-marks, unavoidably. But what is this marking that precedes even the concepts of metaphoricity and propriety? If the *trait* marking the relation and proximity between concepts, such as *Dichten* and *Denken*, is to be called metaphorical, then what is the “affiliation” between the sense of metaphor as *trait*, and the traditional, philosophical concept of metaphor, with which metaphoricity presumably has some relationship? Now, recalling that in Aristotle’s determination of metaphor it was found that metaphor creates something like a detour away from the direct passage between words, meaning and truth; perhaps this movement of detour that *would* have taken place vis-à-vis the classical definition of metaphor (if the classical definition <sup>was</sup> not already unstable) might help to account for the relationship which remains to be explained between metaphor and the *trait*/trace. I will reprint here a passage

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<sup>84</sup> *Marges*, 273.



cited earlier, which might be particularly helpful in illuminating a sense in which metaphor and the trace operate along the same lines with respect to the role they play in language:

Le jeu des différences suppose en effet des synthèses et des renvois qui interdisent qu'à aucun moment, en aucun sens, un élément simple soit *présent* en lui-même et ne renvoie qu'à lui-même. Que ce soit dans l'ordre du discours parlé ou du discours écrit, aucun élément ne peut fonctionner comme signe sans renvoyer à un autre élément qui lui-même n'est pas simplement présent. Cet enchaînement fait que chaque "élément" - phonème ou graphème - se constitue à partir de la trace en lui des autres éléments de la chaîne ou du système. Cet enchaînement, ce tissu, est le *texte* qui ne se produit que dans la transformation d'un autre texte ... Il n'y a, de part en part, que des différences et des traces de traces.<sup>85</sup>

Through the description here of the syntheses and referrals that constitute any element of language, the link between the philosophical concept of metaphor and the deconstructed sense of metaphor as an originary differing and deferral through the *trait* might be unexpectedly straightforward. If the trace is that relation by which differences, syntheses and referrals constitute any given part, then the unity of meaning always *passes through* difference, through syntheses and referrals (of still other syntheses and referrals). This movement is a *deferral* and *diversion* of identity; in other words, a detour – *like* metaphor.

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<sup>85</sup> *Positions*, 37-38.

The key to Derrida's notion of metaphoricity (although the shift in terms is not specified, Derrida seems to use the word 'metaphoricity' to be distinguished from the limited philosophical concept of metaphor), may be in terms of this movement of diversion and deferral, as a principle of *detour*. The detour implied by the classical concept of metaphor was indicated in the following passage, cited previously: "Marking the moment of the turn or of the detour [*du tour ou du détour*] during which meaning might seem to venture forth alone, unloosed from the very thing it aims at however, from the truth which attunes it to its referent, metaphor also opens the wandering of the semantic."<sup>86</sup>

Now considering the case of the sense of metaphor that exceeds this philosophical concept to mark language, with a *trait*, from a pre-originary position: in its evasion and its withdrawal, in combination with its necessary marking of every concept, the *trait* of metaphor that precedes language has as its necessity the effect of a detour. This would be a detour by way of *traces*; of meaning by way of other meanings, and to put it most broadly, of identity by way of difference. The propriety of a concept is constituted by "syntheses and referrals", incisions of the *trait* which mark proximity and distance. Therefore, the propriety of a concept is constituted *by way* of other concepts, by way of a detour of difference. But, unlike most detours, this one does not result in the promised goal, a full presence of meaning that says the thing in itself, or pure, originary propriety. It would be a detour which escapes the teleology of meaning, because instead of fulfilling a promise of full presence and truth, it

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<sup>86</sup> Margins of Philosophy, 241.

instead renders it unattainable – or at least, renders it unattainable *without that which disrupts it and divides it*: namely, the trace of difference – or, perhaps, without *metaphor*. In one sense, it would be a detour without end; a divergence that does not converge, or at least not in the traditional sense in which the end would be “onto-theological”, where the convergence would be a pure unity of meaning, an ideality that would have to have existed already, independent of the signification, independent of the *play* of signifiers and marks that constitutes it. Metaphor as basis for language would be “[l]a pratique de la langue ou du code supposant un jeu de formes, sans substance déterminée et invariable”.<sup>87</sup> Perhaps, in short, if metaphoricity is understood as detour, the detour must be thought not as a means to an end, but as the end itself.

Metaphor, in any aspect of its generalizations (retreat, *re-trait*), maintains the effect of divergence from the essential propriety of meaning that was a possibility of the concept of metaphor articulated by Aristotle. If linguistic and conceptual difference is produced metaphorically, it would be with an emphasis on (the French) ‘*transport*’, the detour, through correspondences, as was described in the correspondence, in terms of difference, between the concepts of thought and poetry. The propriety of each passes by way of the other, by way of its difference from its other; these differences are inscribed on each of them. The detour of metaphor, then, would be away from proper meaning and into “un jeu de formes” without a fundamental semantic substance, guaranteed by *logos*, limiting the play of traces. The *movement* of the “wandering of the semantic” as

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<sup>87</sup> *Marges*, 16.

part of the movement of metaphor in its traditional concept, is repeated here in metaphoricity, although the structure has changed. But while the detour may be an apt term to describe difference as the deferral and divergence from presence, would this movement of deferral and divergence be properly described as metaphorical?

Let us follow this possibility further. As has been described, meaning, as it is constituted by traces of difference, entails a deferral of meaning. One articulation of this deferral is as an *interval*, based on the fact of repetition and iteration. This interval is the space of an *interior* doubling: “l’espacement était l’impossibilité pour une identité de se fermer sur elle-même, sur le dedans de sa propre intériorité ou sur sa coïncidence avec soi. L’irréductibilité de l’espacement, c’est l’irréductibilité de l’autre.”<sup>88</sup> Meaning is always at an interval, deferred, from other meanings and also from itself; its self-identity is constituted by otherness, and it remains at a remove from its own completion in presence. An “element” must be other than itself so it can be the *same* – a notion which combines identity and difference. There is another detour here, then, an “interior” detour away from proper meaning into a relation of otherness that an element has with *itself*; and it is as an *effect* of this detour that the identity of the element is constituted, and re-constituted. But this establishing of identity is not the replenishing of pure, unitary sense: the detour produces something *like* this unity as an effect – which, as an effect, is structurally different than the traditional notion of meaning, which originates in *logos* as truth.

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<sup>88</sup> *Positions*, 130.

Metaphoricity, then, bears not only upon the relations between separate things, constituted and identified by their differential relations which situate each back in its propriety. It is indicated as well in the necessity of difference and deferral shown by the fact of *repetition* and *iteration* that metaphoricity is operative “*within*” the things that do appear, within the individualities that are constituted metaphorically, by way of a detour. Identity is based in difference not only from the rest of the elements of a system in which an identity is founded, but also on the basis of the element’s difference from itself; its repetition or persistence, its appearance generally, requires that it appear and reappear, always other and the same, with a space that is a part of its identity, an interval of difference that makes room for its appearance of unity. The *trait* of relation and difference is operative within the very thing in relation to itself, and in its difference from itself. The detour of difference, then, the metaphorical detour away from wholeness and presence, and *propriety*, is at work within and in relation to any “single” constituent.

A passage from *Of Grammatology* highlights this link between metaphoricity and *différance* in terms of the doubling that precedes appearance. In this passage Derrida discusses the topic of allegory and painting as it corresponds with writing; but its concern coincides with our analysis here. He appraises, critically, the notion that there could be “la représentation pure, sans déplacement métaphorique”:

Le projet de répéter la chose ... comporte donc une métaphoricité, une translation élémentaire. On transporte la chose dans son double (c'est-à-dire déjà dans une idéalité) pour un autre et la représentation parfaite est toujours déjà autre que ce qu'elle double et représente ... La duplication de la chose ... déjà dans l'éclat du phénomène où elle est présente, gardée et regardée, maintenue si peu que ce soit en regard et sous le regard, ouvre l'apparaître comme absence de la chose à son propre et à sa vérité."<sup>89</sup>

Any appearance stands on the condition of a metaphoric movement, a doubling, a detour of non-singularity or non-presence. "On transporte [recall *epiphora*, the "transport" in Aristotle's definition of metaphor] la chose dans son double"; there is not only, then, a metaphorical relation of difference between different things, but there is also a metaphorical transference that *constitutes* the thing itself, solely on its own basis (in the now qualified sense of these terms), in its difference *from* itself (a self which, to be sure, is in another sense possible on the basis of differences from others); this difference makes possible its appearance, its reappearance, and its repetition. And interestingly, this passage seems to suggest that *mimesis* and *homoiosis* do in fact play a role in metaphoricity as such. The metaphorical doubling in this discussion is in the context of artistic representation, and this seems to imply that there is still a relation of resemblance that is or can be involved in the transport of metaphoricity. But if this were the case, it would be a sense of *mimesis* and *homoiosis* *without* an essence, without a proper term - the notion's of *mimesis* and *homoiosis* would

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<sup>89</sup> *De la grammatologie*, 412.

have to be "reinscribed" to account for them differently. This suggests an inquiry that would have to take place elsewhere; the main idea here is that, again, there takes place a primary detour away from propriety.

Another example that can be considered here is the discussion of the sun and its relation to metaphor in "*La mythologie blanche*". 'The sun' is the perfect embodiment of the proper name, being a single referent, "unique, irremplaçable, naturel, autour duquel tout doit tourner, vers lequel tout doit tourner."<sup>90</sup> It is also the paradigm of the sensory – as Leonard Lawlor writes, "[p]hilosophical discourse is constituted by terms and oppositions ... such as *phainesthai*, *aletheia*, etc., oppositions such as the visible and the invisible, appearing and disappearing, presence and absence. All these basic terms and oppositions derive from the sun, its light and movement"<sup>91</sup> But the sun itself is only improperly known; it displaces its sensory self, turns and hides, furnishing only improper sensible knowledge. And at another level, the whole, total presence of the sun (which, rigorously defined, would be an intemporal or absolute existence) is displaced by its doubling itself in its disappearing, reappearing and changing, by existing and subsisting, always other and the same. In Lawlor's words, the sun, and therefore nature in general, "is a sort of trace (*gramma*). The turning and hiding of the sun implies that the sensory thing is always differentiating itself as and in the now, dividing and duplicating itself as other than itself."<sup>92</sup> On the one hand, the sun, Derrida tells us, "est inscrit dans un système de relations qui le constitue. Ce

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<sup>90</sup> *Marges*, 300.

<sup>91</sup> *Imagination and Chance*, 22.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

nom n'est plus le nom propre d'une chose unique auquel la métaphore *surviendrait*; il a déjà commencé à dire l'origine multiple, divisée, de toute semence, l'oeil, l'invisibilité, la mort, le père, le 'nom propre', etc." This is obviously a dense passage which bears on the crux of our investigation, and one that also calls for an extensive reading into the relation of metaphor and the sun, and its connection to truth, *logos*, and philosophy. But in terms of the focus of our analysis at this point, it explains the metaphoricity of proper names, insofar as their determinations are based around the "system of relations that constitutes" them. But then, again, the relation to others, to other relations, is furthermore doubled within the thing, the unity that is named:

le soleil proprement dit, le soleil sensible, ne fournit pas seulement de mauvaises connaissances parce que de mauvaises métaphores, il est seulement métaphorique. Puisqu'on ne peut plus s'assurer, nous dit Aristote, de ses caractères sensibles comme de ses "propres", le soleil n'est jamais proprement présent dans le discours. ... Le plus naturel de la nature comporte en lui-même de quoi sortir de soi; il compose avec la lumière 'artificiel', s'eclipse, s'ellipse, a toujours été autre, lui-même ..."<sup>93</sup>

If any name, even that of the sun (whose "metaphorical" role is so essential in philosophy, "donnant de surcroît la mesure des bonnes et des mauvais métaphores, des claires et des obscures; puis, à la limite, de ce qui est pire ou

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<sup>93</sup> *Marges*, 300.



meilleur que la métaphore”<sup>94</sup>), is itself “solely metaphorical”, then the *trait* of metaphor is at work within every name; the movement of metaphoricity is inscribed within each term simply by the fact of its appearance; for its appearance alone belies its full, proper presence, which would be an absolute, intemporal existence.

## 8) Conclusion

Metaphor leads to this web of problems that, within the context of philosophy, is to some extent paradoxical, and cannot, in the context of traditional philosophy at least, be clearly resolved. But if the generalized sense of metaphoricity, in its complexity, can be reduced to a single principle, it would be the absence of the proper. Metaphor, having been found to have an effect at the levels of the conceptual articulation of philosophy and metaphysics, cannot be determined narrowly; its reach precedes that which would circumscribe it in such a way. Its determination would be in terms of withdrawing: its own withdrawing, and that of the proper. The problem of metaphoricity, then, in this way leads to the same level of originality as *différance*, which precedes all language, and all conceptual distinctions, as the condition for the appearance of these. But metaphoricity at this level is both more specific than *différance*, and less clear. In one sense, metaphor supplements *différance* with a powerful

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

articulation of *différance* in terms of the absence of propriety. For the concepts of proper and metaphor would be established at the level of distinction that precedes the conceptual bifurcations that circumscribe them, the level at which it is the difference between concepts that is the constitutive quality. Metaphor and proper, then, in their originary definitions, can only be defined in their opposition to each other. But in this case there is no proper or metaphorical "ground" on which these terms originate. The possibility, and impossibility, of each one is inscribed in the other. And this is the detour, the inscriptive movement of metaphor, that withdraws, and cannot be fixed or stabilized. The concept and metaphor take on a complex and endless dynamism of which "*Le retrait de la métaphore*" begins an elaboration that could have no end, which could never find a fixed reference point on which to establish metaphorical and proper. In their articulation through the differential *trait*, metaphor and proper are defined by the relation between them, which is neither metaphoric nor proper. "*La mythologie blanche*" in fact anticipates this outcome: "Et par conséquent de faire sauter l'opposition rassurante du métaphorique et du propre dans laquelle l'un et l'autre ne faisaient jamais que se réfléchir et se renvoyer leur rayonnement."<sup>95</sup>

But it is the question of metaphor more than other concepts, reaching its first limits quickly through the semantic view of language, that becomes the key to the very formation of this terrain, of the structure of *traits* that defines *both* proper and metaphorical. Metaphor is required to establish the proper, and vice

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<sup>95</sup> *Marges*, 323.

versa: metaphor makes its detour through propriety, and propriety through metaphor. But in the case of “proper” and “metaphor”, the mirroring is uniquely endless, for the so-called propriety of meaning is that which organizes the discourse itself. A ceaseless divergence results, then, of one through the other, by way of the *trait* – which, as division, vanishes. This is what the *trait* represents, quasi-metaphorically. But this *movement* too must withdraw, so that metaphor and propriety can be articulated as such, insofar as they are possible: but whatever the “as such” is, it is always based on a prior entanglement, a prior complicity, a prior division.

Metaphoricity takes a certain priority in the relation of proper and metaphorical; for both proper and metaphor become, although paradoxically, more metaphorical than proper. In all instances of their relationship, the proper is undermined; metaphor is the norm, for as a detour it captures at least the process, the diversion through difference.

But there is a sense in which the entanglement of metaphor and the concept, of metaphor and proper meaning, is really not resolved one way or the other. The proper, it has been shown, meets its impossibility in metaphor; and metaphor's impossibility is tied up with all aspects of language. At the limits of language, there is no metaphorical, nor proper: the opposition depends upon the *between* of the two, their system of exchanges, the *trait* of their relation. Any name, the name of ‘proper’ or ‘metaphor’ as well, is always already caught up in the system of relations that constitutes it. And the lines that separate them are neither metaphoric nor non-metaphoric; neither proper nor improper. But there

is a sense in which metaphoricity, understood as irreducible relation and lack of a proper, is better suited to describe the production of language, of meaning and of difference, <sup>~</sup>then propriety; as I have described in terms of the detour, propriety is an effect of difference, and therefore can be said to be an effect of metaphoricity. Metaphor extends beyond the bounds of philosophy, and it cannot be contained. The withdrawal of the proper is metaphorical: and the withdrawal of the metaphorical is what makes the proper appear: but only insofar as the latter is already divided against its other.

Thus when Derrida makes the gesture of associating the *trait* of *différance* with metaphor, it is in part due to a fortunate agreement between the movement of metaphor and *différance*, and in part because metaphoricity disrupts the proper at a fundamental level. The detour I have described as originary metaphoricity, can in fact be construed as a metaphor of metaphor. Metaphor leads to *différance*, but at that level, its proper meaning being a matter of difference, it is no longer metaphor in any distinct manner. And *différance* can be described in other ways than metaphoricity. But metaphor, in the broadest sense, as the movement through the other, the detour, brings a range of possibilities for filling out *différance* in ways that other terms – writing, the trace, et al. – do not capture as sharply. The problem of metaphor leads sharply to the fact of the limits of propriety for the concepts of philosophy, showing how, at some level, they meet up and intertwine with metaphor, rooted in the difference between them that cannot be addressed as either proper or improper; metaphor, most broadly understood, marks the inclusive distinction between things, thereby

establishing their propriety. But *this* mark, in turn, withdraws, allowing the “present” to come forward, to be identified as proper, as an effect of metaphor.

In my own view, the persistent tension between possibility and impossibility that has risen repeatedly in this analysis finds no easy answer; it connects with the broader question of how to reconcile the account of language based on *différance* with the traditional structures of language such as concept, proper meaning, origins, and so on – a difficult question which bears upon the reception of Derrida’s work continuously, and which, despite the successes of deconstruction and *différance*, continues to cause it to be relegated, to some extent, to the margins of philosophy. The reduction to metaphoricity that is seen in “*La mythologie blanche*” and “*Le retrait de la métaphore*” does not provide a simple, stable basis for the derivation of proper meaning and metaphor; even in comparison with other articulations of *différance*, the effects of *différance* through metaphor are more dynamic, perhaps more radical, and the challenge of reconciling metaphor with univocity and proper meaning has not been fully resolved. What would seem to be the most obvious response, and one that this essay has invoked, which is that *différance*, or more specifically metaphoricity, brings about proper meaning as an effect of metaphor, has a definite plausibility, and finds corroboration in Derrida’s texts; but there is certainly room for this connection to be elucidated, and worked out further. This is not to say that the credibility or validity of *différance* hinges on this explanation, for Derrida – as well as his precursors in Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud – has shown that the irreducibility of difference is no illusion. If there is “illusion” at work, it would

seem to lie on the other side of language, on the metaphysical distinctions that always, at some level, require metaphoricity to appear.

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